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A Defence of Ideal Theory Approaches to Just Choice

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Tuesday 30th August 2016

Abstract

One of the most common goals of political theory is to inform *just choice*; with ‘just choice’ referring to the class of practical, political decisions that result in society becoming more just. However, important questions can be asked about the best way political theory can perform this informing function. In this thesis I look to answer some of these questions through my defence of an *ideal theory* approach to just choice. This approach claims that ideals, that is, conceptions of the rules that would govern a fully just society, are necessary in order to arrive at just choices. I look to show the conditions ideal theory and ideals have to satisfy in order to perform this just choice informing role. In doing this this thesis underlabours for ideal theory by providing theoretical support for future substantive work in this area.

This thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the structure of the thesis, the main areas of debate, and the implications of my research. Chapter 2 addresses the fundamental question discussed above, seeking to demonstrate that it is only when our choices are informed by ideals that we are consistently able to make just choices. Chapter 3 considers the distinction between short-term choice, which aims to make society immediately more similar to an ideal, and long-term choice, which aims to ultimately realise an ideal in full. I look to show the conditions that ideals have to satisfy in order to inform each type of just choice. Particularly important here are the feasibility conditions that have to be met by ideals that are to inform long-term choice. Chapter 4 considers a conundrum confronting those aiming to make just choices. All other things being equal long-term choice offers greater rewards than short-term choice does; however short-term choice is lower risk, requiring less investment of political resources such as time, labour, and money, and promising more likely returns on these investments. In this chapter I look to show the conditions that have to hold for it to be defensible to favour a long-term approach over a short-term approach. Chapter 5 considers whether the methods required of ideal theory, particularly the feasible ideal theory required of long-term choice, may be inherently contradictory. This is due to possible tensions between fact-sensitive and fact-insensitive aspects of the theorising process. In this chapter I look to show that this is not the case and that the ideal theory process is not contradictory. Chapter 6 summarises my key arguments and reflects on some of the main themes of this thesis.

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1. Introduction

It is uncontroversial to say that one of the primary aims of much political theory is to inform *just choice*. By ‘just choice’ I refer to the type of practical, social and political decision-making that results in society becoming more just. As we shall see below, recent years have witnessed a renewal of debate around the precise role that political theory should play in such choice. On one hand there are those who argue that political theory ought to exclusively provide concrete and fact-sensitive recommendations, which speak directly to particular instances of decision-making. On the other hand there are those who stress the importance of more abstract, moral philosophising to any attempts to arrive at just choices. From one perspective this can be seen as an irrevocable conflict between nonideal theorists and ideal theorists respectively. While I believe that conceptualising these enterprises in this manner is ultimately misguided, it is right to highlight a seemingly fundamental tension surrounding the proper role of abstract and concrete thinking in political theorising.

This thesis offers a response to these competing perspectives on just choice. I will look to defend the fundamental assumptions of the ideal approach, while, at the same time, stressing the important role that more contextual, fact-sensitive considerations should play in formulating ideals of justice. This is not an attempt to find a middle ground between the two approaches. Rather I look to work firmly within the basic assumptions of the ideal approach while seeking to reinforce it where necessary with insight from more concrete perspectives.

In what follows I want to briefly outline the four areas of debate that this thesis will focus on. Here I will also state four Key Objectives that my thesis will meet in responding to these points (§ I). Following this I consider the notions of ideal theory and non-ideal theory discussed above. I will defend a complimentary approach to conceptualising the two enterprises, which treats the latter as logically dependent on the former. I will show how this model provides a framework that my discussion of ideals and just choice fits within (§ II). I will then consider the specific challenges that I look to address in this thesis, and in doing so summarise the main points that

subsequent chapters will discuss, before explaining how each chapter meets one of the Key Objectives mentioned above (§ III). Having offered this overview of the structure of this thesis I then consider some of the theoretical and practical implications of pursuing this line of inquiry (§ IV).

I. Key Objectives

(1) As stated above, this thesis responds to debates between defenders of ideal approaches to just choice and their critics. A fundamental concern of this debate is establishing whether or not ideals are necessary in order to make just choices. As noted, I look to defend an ideal based approach to just choice, where ‘ideals’ are understood to be conceptions of the rules that would govern political decision making in a just society. *This thesis will demonstrate that it is only when our choices are informed by ideals that we are able to consistently make just choices.*

(2) Just choices can be divided into *short-term choices*, which aim to make society *immediately* more similar to a given ideal, and *long-term choices*, which aim to eventually make society conform to a given ideal in full. The standards that ideals will have to meet will differ according to which type of choice they need to inform. While it may be imperative that the ideals that inform long-term choice are feasible, this may not hold for those ideals informing short-term choice. *This thesis will identify the conditions ideals have to satisfy in order to inform each type of just choice.*

(3) The question of whether to pursue short-term or long-term choice prompts a range of responses. At first glance we may intuitively favour long-term choice as it yields greater gains over time, and secures a fully just society. On the other hand, short-term choice strives for smaller gains and only partial justice. However the issue of prospective gains is not the only, nor the most important, factor. More pertinent are the costs and risks associated with each type of choice. All other things being equal, while the gains from short-term choice are ultimately lower, they are achieved immediately with relatively low risk. In contrast, long-term choice requires greater investment of political resources such as time, labour, and money, yet, again all other things being equal, is less likely to be achieved and is thus a higher risk approach to

just choice. *This thesis will identify the conditions that have to hold in order for it to be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice.*

(4) A further issue arising from the use of short-term and long-term ideals are the methods appropriate to theorising them. As we shall see, in order to arrive at normatively accurate ideals, we have to use ‘idealisations’, that is, assumptions that do not accurately represent real world phenomena. This distance from facts as they hold at present allows us to formulate ideals without being constrained by certain contemporary factors. However it will also be shown that long-term choice requires that ideals meet certain standards of feasibility that requires that they show *greater* sensitivity to facts. There thus appears to be a contradiction at the heart of the methods we use for theorising long-term ideals. *This thesis will show that we can arrive at feasible ideals while employing idealisations, and thus that just choice informing ideals do not rely on contradictory methods.*

In summary then, this thesis looks to meet the following Key Objectives.

1. Demonstrate that it is only when choices are informed by ideals that we are able to consistently make just choices.
2. Identify the conditions ideals have to satisfy in order to inform just choice.
3. Identify the conditions that have to hold in order for it to be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice.
4. Demonstrate that we can arrive at feasible ideals while employing idealisations.

II. Ideal Theory and Nonideal Theory

Having sketched the general aims of this thesis we can now turn to consider the broader framework within which to situate this debate about ideals and just choice. In this section I want to provide definitions of ideal and nonideal theory, and consider how we ought to conceptualise the relationship between these two enterprises.

The distinction between ideal theory and nonideal theory is drawn by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*.¹ We can define ideal theory in terms of both its *product* and its *process*.² The former refers, unsurprisingly, to ideals themselves. As we saw above, ideals are conceptions of the rules that would govern a fully just society. To illustrate how this works, consider a hypothetical ideal that states that justice requires that all individuals have their basic needs met and are able to democratically participate in the organisation of society's production. Call this the 'Socialist Ideal'.³ A society could perhaps be termed 'just' by the standards of this ideal if its laws took privately owned businesses into common ownership and regulated wages to ensure lower levels of inequality.

The *process* of ideal theory on the other hand refers to the methods that are employed in order to generate ideals. As mentioned in the previous section, *idealisation* is the primary method used in ideal theorising. We have seen that idealisation refers to the process of intentionally using conceptualisations of real world phenomena that do not accurately reflect the form these phenomena actually take. Such conceptualisations, which themselves are also referred to as 'idealisations', are used to help create theoretical spaces that we otherwise would not have access to. While idealisations can do this in various ways, the most important function they perform from the perspective of ideal theory is the *normative function*.

The normative function is used to create premises that are suitable for deriving ideals of justice from. In order to generate ideals of justice we have to use conceptualisations of important phenomena such as how compliant we can expect people to be to laws that adhere to a given ideal. However if we use a realistic, accurate conceptualisation of compliance then we may end up with counter-intuitive results. To illustrate,

¹ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971/1999), p. 8. While Rawls's work is generally viewed as an early and particularly important discussion of these terms, conceptual distinctions between ideal theory and nonideal theory can be traced much further back than this. Lea Ypi for instance identifies such a distinction in Plato's *Republic*. See Lea Ypi, 'On the Confusion between Ideal and Non-ideal Theory in Recent Debates on Global Justice' *Political Studies* Vol. 58, pp. 536-555 (2010), p. 537.

² A similar approach is favoured by Pablo Gilabert in his definition of Rawls's understanding of ideal theory. See Pablo Gilabert, 'Global Justice and Poverty Relief in Nonideal Circumstances' *Social Theory and Practice* Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 411-438 (2008), pp. 417-418.

³ This is not intended to be a robustly theorised ideal of socialism but rather an indication of what an ideal of justice looks like and the function it plays.

consider again the Socialist Ideal discussed above. If we looked to derive an ideal of justice from true levels of compliance then we would likely find that we would not arrive at the Socialist Ideal. We can imagine that such an ideal with its appropriation of private property and regulation of wages may be deeply unpopular at present, conflicting with contemporary attitudes to economics and taxation, particularly amongst the wealthy. As such, any ideal that was derived from current levels of compliance would likely be far less egalitarian and radical.

However those with socialist intuitions may feel that such a result would be ‘normatively inaccurate’.⁴ We might think that ideals should not represent what people will comply with now but rather what we hope they will comply with in the future. For this reason it is prudent to replace an assumption premised on contemporary levels of compliance with a more permissive, idealised conceptualisation of compliance. Doing this allows us to arrive at ambitious, normatively accurate ideals. This is important as we may reasonably feel that ideals that are not feasible now, may be feasible in the future, as current levels of compliance are not fixed.⁵

How then do we define *nonideal* theory? Again it is helpful to consider both the product and the process of this enterprise. Nonideal theory aims to produce judgements that lead to the just choices discussed above. Thus the outcome of successful nonideal theorising is society either becoming immediately more just, via short-term choice, or moving in the direction of full justice, via long-term choice. The contrast with ideal theory is clear: nonideal theory takes a more practical outlook and the product of its theorising is tangible increases in justice.

The *process* of nonideal theory is similarly distinct from that of ideal theory. Nonideal theory engages with the world as it currently is and thus generally employs much more accurate conceptualisations of phenomena such as compliance. As it is the aim of nonideal theory to increase justice it is necessary to be realistic about how this can be

⁴ The term ‘normatively accurate’, and the derivative, ‘normatively inaccurate’, are employed by Zofia Stemplowska. See Zofia Stemplowska, ‘What’s Ideal about Ideal Theory?’ *Social Theory and Practice* Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 319-340 (2008), p. 333.

⁵ For a discussion of the uses of idealisation for this function see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 216.

done given current levels of compliance and so on. Thus where ideal theory idealises away from reality, nonideal theory confronts it.

Clearly then, ideal theory and nonideal theory are markedly different enterprises. Where ideal theory is concerned with arriving at conceptions of the rules that would govern a fully just society, nonideal theory is concerned with making the real world a more just place. Where ideal theory uses idealisation, nonideal theory engages with real world phenomena. Given these differences it is understandable that some theorists have portrayed ideal theory and nonideal theory as completely unrelated and distinct enterprises. Particularly notable are those critics of ideal theory who, citing this approach's abstract and disconnected character and apparent disinterest towards actually increasing justice in the real world, argue that we ought to reject it in favour of the more concrete and immediate nonideal alternative that takes a practical and intuitive approach to ethics and questions of justice.⁶

It can appear reasonable to assume that ideal theory and nonideal theory ought to be treated as necessarily distinct and conflicting approaches, with political theorists having to choose one over the other. However this assumption is misplaced. Rawls provides a compelling case for why we should see both theories as constituent parts of a complete theory of justice. For Rawls, it is only when we know what full justice demands that we are able to make just choices. Without such ideals, we lack both the standards of comparison necessary for short-term choice and the ultimate goal required by long-term choice. It is not the case then, as Shane. J. Ralston would put it, that ideal theory is simply abstract 'arm chair philosophy [...] of little use to the institutional designer.'⁷ Rather, it is a logical necessity for *all* nonideal theorising.

In defending this position, we are thus able to accept some of the concerns raised by ideal theory's critics. As Rawls rightly observes, it is those issues that fall under nonideal theory's auspices that 'are the pressing and urgent matters', '[t]hese are the

⁶ For examples of the non-ideal or anti-ideal approach see Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology" *Hypatia* Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 165-184 (2005); Elizabeth Anderson, 'Reply to Critics of The Imperative of Integration' *Political Studies Review* Vol. 12, pp. 376-382 (2014); Jack Knight, 'The Imperative of Non-Ideal Theory' *Political Studies Review* Vol. 12, pp. 361-368 (2014); and Leif Wenar, 'Property Rights and the Resource Curse' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 2-32 (2008).

⁷ Shane J. Ralston, 'Can Pragmatists be Institutionalists? John Dewey Joins the Nonideal/Ideal Theory Debate' *Human Studies* Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 65-84 (2010), p. 78.

things that we are faced with in everyday life.’⁸ However, we are only able to properly confront these matters when we are equipped with ideals of justice, which we can only possess through ideal theorising. As such we should reject approaches that look to operate exclusively within one theory or the other and instead see ideal theory and nonideal theory as two aspects of a cohesive and complete theory of justice.

This thesis is thus at one level a study in the relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory. I begin from Rawls’s above quoted assumption that we want to deal with the ‘urgent’ injustices that confront us in the real world. That is, we want to be able to make choices that will improve the justness of society. However, like Rawls, I acknowledge that ideal theorising is a vital part of making just choices. Moreover, I also look to go beyond Rawls in showing the conditions that have to hold in order for ideal theory to be able to perform this crucial just choice informing role.

For these reasons, my argument cannot be understood as an example of ideal theorising itself. I spend little time defending particular conceptions of ideals, nor explaining how they are arrived at.⁹ This is to say that I do not argue for example that egalitarianism is more just than conservatism or that libertarianism is to be preferred over utilitarianism. Nor is this a case for a particular nonideal theory of justice. Indeed, there is even less time dedicated to discussion of the specific theoretical processes required if nonideal theory is to be able to apply ideals to either short-term or long-term choice. Relatedly this thesis also does not engage with important normative arguments in nonideal theory about the extent to which ends can justify means and the sacrifices required by current generations for the sake of later ones.

Indeed there are very few normative arguments present here at all, at least few that are normative in a conventional manner or in any sense pertaining to justice. The normative claims made here relate to how we ought to theorise ideals and how we ought to understand the relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory. They are thus *methodological prescriptions* rather than ethical prescriptions. For these reasons this thesis is more properly understood as being at the level of metatheory. I

⁸ It is for this reason that, for Rawls, ‘the nature and aims of a perfectly just society is the fundamental part of the theory of justice.’ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 8.

⁹ While there is discussion of specific nonideal theories and ideals, these are almost always used to illustrate more general theoretical processes, rather than to defend particular normative claims.

want to understand why an ideal approach to just choice is necessary and viable, and the conditions that ideals have to meet in order to be able to inform just choice. This thesis is thus a process of *underlabouring* for ideal theory and just choice.¹⁰ By ‘underlabouring’ I mean that this research looks to establish the necessity of, and the conditions within which, ideal theory operates, and in doing so provide a theoretical framework that justifies and enhances subsequent ideal theorising.

In doing this I engage with a series of notable challenges that confront this ideal approach to just choice. In the following section I will briefly summarise the structure of this thesis, stressing the different challenges that each chapter addresses. I will also discuss how I respond to these and in doing so sketch how I intend to meet the four Key Objectives stated in Section I.

III. Challenges to the Ideal Theory Approach to Just Choice

Chapter 2 looks to defend the ‘ideal claim’ that in order to arrive at both short-term and long-term just choices, judgements have to be informed by ideals. The main threat to this position comes from Amartya Sen who makes the claim that ideals are neither necessary nor sufficient for short-term choice, offering in place of this an ideal-free model for arriving at just choice.¹¹ The challenge posed by Sen is significant. If he is correct and ideals are not required for short-term choice then not only will half of the ideal claim be invalid but long-term choice will be undermined as well. Sen presents a direct route to just choice that avoids demanding and extensive debates about ideals,

¹⁰ The term ‘underlabouring’ can be traced back to John Locke’s remarks that for philosophers, ‘It is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish which lies in the way to knowledge.’ Locke’s point here being that one of philosophy’s purposes is, not to compete with science, but to facilitate scientific endeavour. See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* ed. by A.D. Woozley (London: Collins, 1690/1964), p. 58. Underlabouring has more recently become a central pillar of ‘critical realist’ approaches to philosophy, with Roy Bhaskar summing it up as the pursuit of the ‘knowledge of the necessary conditions of knowledge’. See Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences, 3rd Edition* (London: Routledge, 1979/1998), p. 10. See also Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (New York: Verso, 1975/1997), p. 10. For a critical, rejection of this approach see Richard Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy: A Critique of Critical Realism’ *Capital and Class* No. 37, pp. 87-116 (1989), p. 89.

¹¹ Amartya Sen, ‘What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?’ *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 103, No. 5, pp. 214-238 (2006).

ideal theory methodology, and so on. As such he offers an enticingly simple alternative to *any* ideal-based approach.

In responding to Sen I make the distinction between *internal categories* and *external categories*, with instantiations of the former having standards of comparison inherent within them, and instantiations of the latter requiring further, ideal instantiations of the category from which to derive standards of comparison. For example, while we can compare the height of two mountains without referring to a third ‘ideal mountain’, we cannot compare the justness of different political choices, without reference to what true, *ideal* justice is.

This chapter also makes the philosophically less contentious claim that ideals are necessary for long-term just choice. As long-term choice aims to achieve ideals in full it is much harder to defend the claim that we can make such choices without their being informed by ideals. In the case of making either short-term choices or long-term choices I reject the claim that ideals can ever be *sufficient*. By arguing this position I establish the necessity of a distinct nonideal theory to help employ ideals in arriving at just choices. In making these claims I seek to meet the first Key Objective, by demonstrating that it is only when nonideal decision-making is informed by ideals that we can expect to arrive at consistently just choices.

Having thus established the necessity of ideals *Chapter 3* turns to the question of the conditions these ideals have to meet in order to inform just choice. In doing this I build on the more abstract definition of ideals employed in Chapter 2. Crucial to this is identifying the different conditions required of ideals informing short-term choice, compared to those informing long-term choice. I begin by making the uncontroversial claim that in order for ideals to inform long-term choice they have to be feasible, on the grounds that as infeasible ideals cannot be achieved, they make poor targets for long-term choice. I then discuss those ideals that are consciously made *without* reference to feasibility conditions. As well as defending these ideals from various

criticisms from David Miller,¹² I show that while infeasible ideals are unable to inform long-term choice, they ought to be able to inform short-term choice.

I conclude the chapter by considering a challenge to the notion of feasibility. The ‘uncertainty gambit’ suggests that in conditions of uncertainty about what is and what is not feasible it is sensible to largely avoid concerns about feasibility altogether to minimise the risk of losing the opportunity of achieving an ideal due to wrongly dismissing it as infeasible. Here I am particularly interested in Marxist arguments in support of this position, drawing on that tradition’s attempts to denaturalise supposedly objective facts, showing them instead to be contingent and ideological. I reject this claim though, suggesting that uncertainty should push us, towards, rather than away from, feasibility conditions. Moreover I suggest that Marxist theory can be used to conceptualise a stringent approach to feasibility that can give us greater confidence in our feasibility assessments. This chapter thus meets the second Key Objective by identifying the conditions ideals have to meet in order to inform just choice, with a notable feature of this chapter being the more specific claims relating to the feasibility conditions required of ideals that inform long-term choice.

Chapter 4 pursues this point further in expanding on the earlier discussion of feasibility assessments. I begin by introducing the concept of ‘obstacles’ to feasibility. These represent phenomena or processes that either have to be avoided or removed if an ideal is to meet feasibility conditions. For example, while an ideal must avoid the *fixed* obstacle of being premised on a logical impossibility, it can potentially at some stage remove a *contingent* obstacle such as insufficient compliance.

While the discussion up until this point is generally at a formal level of abstraction, the remainder of Chapter 4 necessarily introduces a more concrete perspective. More specifically I look to populate the formal feasibility model postulated in the first half of the chapter with particular insights from Marxist social theory. Building on the conclusion to Chapter 3, I argue that Marxism is particularly useful for this purpose as its theories naturally lend themselves to especially stringent and exclusive feasibility conditions. I suggest that if Marxist explanations of the logic and structure of capitalist

¹² David Miller, *Justice for Earthlings: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 230.

societies are correct then liberal ideals, in the sense of ideals that are premised on capitalist economies, will be infeasible, due to the incorrigibility of capitalism in the face of attempts to either stabilise markets or use wealth redistribution to offset its tendency towards inequality.

I conclude this chapter by suggesting that according to the Marxist model of feasibility, Rawls's ideal of justice may not meet his own conditions of 'realistic utopianism', and instead be merely 'utopian'.¹³ The Marxist model on the other hand suggests one potentially profitable way of meeting the third Key Objective, i.e. demonstrating the conditions that have to hold in order for it to be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice. First, it provides a stringent and exclusive conception of feasibility that ought to decrease the likelihood that the ideals that are used to inform just choice will turn out to be infeasible and thus a waste of political resources. Second, it also makes a practical case *against* short-term choice by suggesting that due to the structurally necessary features of capitalism, attempts to reform it in order to increase justice will likely fail.

Having done this, *Chapter 5* returns to a more abstract level of discussion, concerned with identifying general standards that ideal theory ought to adhere to. Here I move from focusing on the *product* of ideal theory, i.e. ideals themselves, to discussion of the *process*, i.e. the methods used to generate these ideals. Paramount to this discussion is the method of idealisation. I begin by outlining three functions performed by idealisations, namely *abstraction*, *simplification*, and *normativity*. I look to show that these functions are necessary for a range of fundamental philosophical arguments. Having done this I turn to consider the normative function in particular, as this is the method that is necessary to arrive at normatively accurate ideals. This function prompts two major criticisms. The first is that the necessity of idealisation conflicts with the necessity of feasibility assessments, as it seems that where one pushes us towards facts the other pulls us away from them. The second is that even if idealisations are necessary for ideals to escape real world constraints, they may result

¹³ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples, with 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited'* (London: Harvard University, 2001), p. 6.

in ideals that are too distant to inform just choice. This latter point being what Laura Valentini refers to as ‘the paradox of ideal theory.’¹⁴

In response to these concerns I show that idealisations are actually required in order to make thorough feasibility assessments. Moreover, I argue that idealisations need not be completely independent of factual considerations, and that by having idealisations that are also constrained by feasibility we can produce long-term ideals that are neither limited by contemporary facts nor too distant from them to inform just choice. I also address Charles W. Mills’s claims that normative idealisation is necessarily ideological,¹⁵ showing that it is actually, among other things, a way of escaping ideological thought. In doing all of this then I meet the fourth and final Key Objective of this thesis by demonstrating that we can arrive at feasible ideals while employing idealisations, and that there are thus no contradictions inherent in the necessary methods of ideal theory.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of the previous four chapters and discusses the repercussions that this thesis has on the ideal theory and nonideal theory relationship more broadly.

IV. Implications

Having outlined the structure of my thesis and the Key Objectives I aim to meet I would now like to discuss some of its theoretical and practical implications. In this section I will consider what my argument means for how we conceptualise the relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory, as well as the structure that we impose on each approach to theorising individually. I will then conclude by considering the political implications of this work, particularly as it pertains to the future of radical, long-term just choice.

A fundamental implication of this thesis is that it should prompt a rethinking of the relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory. We saw in Section II that we

¹⁴ Laura Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory’ *The Journal of Political Philosophy* Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 332-355 (2009), p. 333.

¹⁵ Mills, pp. 171-172.

require ideals, and thus ideal theory, if we are to know what to do in nonideal conditions, and thus if we are to make just choices. While nothing I claim seeks to undermine this fundamental assumption, I will suggest that the seemingly unidirectional conceptualisation of this relationship cannot lead to ideals that will inform just choice. Rather, if ideals are to perform this function then the relationship will have to move in both directions.

Ideals need to be theorised in a manner that is highly sensitive to feasibility conditions. This means that ideal theorists have to take nonideal inputs seriously. A consequence of this is that political theorists may find that they need to work with social scientists, and possibly even natural scientists, in order to best model feasibility conditions. Throughout this thesis I look to clarify the consequences that my methodological claims have on the interdisciplinarity required of political theory.

More fundamentally though, the need for robust conceptions of feasibility will likely mean that at least some explanatory theorising at the nonideal level must occur before we can expect to formulate helpful ideals for long-term choice. As we shall see however, this claim should not be overstated, ideal theory must retain its logical priority, even if it ought not to have temporal priority. The fact that we can only make just choices when informed by ideals of justice is not challenged by these claims.

As noted above, this thesis looks to perform an underlabouring service for ideal theory. It does this by establishing both the necessity of ideal theory for just choice and the conditions that ideals and ideal theory methods have to satisfy if they are to perform this just choice informing function. In doing this I hope to strengthen the case for ideal theory and provide a framework that subsequent ideal theorising can draw on in order to be optimally effective. This is particularly the case with the methodologically more complex, feasible ideals that are required for long-term choice.

While I believe this framework establishes standards that are applicable to ideal theorising in general, the work on feasibility in Chapters 3 and 4 highlights the contribution that Marxism can make in delineating feasibility. Thus while I want to show the necessity of ideal theory more generally, I believe that Marxist social theory provides a particularly strong route to arriving at feasible ideals for long-term choice.

The most fundamental practical repercussions of this project are reasonably clear. Most would accept that we ought to be trying to make the world more just. However failure to properly interrogate the best means of doing this will lead to sub-optimal choices and wasted political resources. This thesis aims to provide some clarity on this subject in order to set the standards and conditions that look to ensure, all other things being equal, that we can arrive at just choices; that is that our political decision-making is optimal and a sound investment of political resources.

Another important practical point comes from the discussion of short-term and long-term approaches to just choice. The persistence of these debates is evidenced in, for example, the division within the British Labour Party regarding whether the party should be committed to common ownership of the means of production.¹⁶ The question of whether progressive legislation can be truly secured within capitalism or only beyond it remains a pertinent one, which this thesis hopefully provides some further insight into. In this particular case it also suggests that the incorrigibility of capitalism lends further support to more long-term, socialist answers to the questions social democrats ask.

Perhaps more importantly though, demonstrating that higher-risk long-term choice can be a defensible approach over superficially lower-risk short-term choice is important in itself. Not only is there an intuitive appeal inherent in achieving a fully just society rather than merely a partially just one, there are also urgent practical reasons for doing so. Humanity currently faces a range of potentially existential threats, in the forms of global warming, economic crises, terrorism, and the continuing possibility of nuclear

¹⁶ Debates centre round Clause IV of the Labour Party's constitution. For most of Labour's history, Clause IV stated the party's commitment to 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange'. See Ian Adams, *Political Ideology Today*, 2nd Edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 100. However in 1995 the constitution was revised significantly with references to common ownership replaced with a statement that looks to serve 'the public interest' through 'a dynamic economy' that functions via 'the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition' and 'a thriving private sector'. See The Labour Party, *Rule Book* (2013). For a defence of the original version of Clause IV see G.A. Cohen, 'Is Socialism Inseparable from Common Ownership?' *Socialist Renewal Pamphlet 1* (1995).

war.¹⁷ In such circumstances the need to make choices that aim towards truly radical change becomes an even greater necessity.

V. Conclusion

This thesis thus aims to defend an ideal theory approach to just choice. Within this I look to show why ideals are necessary for just choices. I also seek to identify the conditions that ideals have to satisfy in order to inform just choice, before considering which further conditions have to hold in order to favour the apparently higher risk and higher reward long-term approach to just choice, over the safer, short-term alternative. I also show that ideal theory is a methodologically coherent and non-contradictory approach. In making these claims I demonstrate the relevance and importance of ideal theory for real world politics.

¹⁷ Not only do issues such as these pose serious challenges on their own but each can also act as a catalyst for the development of the rest. For example, inequality and the unequal impact of climate change can potentially lead to conditions that are conducive to terrorist radicalisation.

2. The Necessity of Ideals for Just Choice

This chapter argues that in order to make choices that generally increase justice it is necessary to employ *ideal conceptions of justice*.¹ As I noted in the previous chapter, ideal conceptions of justice (or simply ‘ideals’) are the sets of rules or principles that would govern legislation in a just society. In other words, if one does not possess a conception of the rules that would govern a just society then one will be unable to say whether any given available option is better or worse than any other given available option. Without ideals, acts of political choice will be speculative and less likely to result in *just choices*. Just choices are understood to be choices that prefigure action that improves the justness of society. As we have seen, just choices, and by extension the actions they prefigure, can either lead to an increase in the immediate justness of society (short-term choices) or move society towards fully adhering to the ideal (long-term choices).

As we saw in the previous chapter, while the formulation of ideals is generally considered a part of ideal theory,² the question of which of a given set of available choices will further justice is a part of *nonideal normative theory*.³ In these terms, this chapter claims that to properly adhere to nonideal theory, i.e. to generally make just choices, it is necessary that our choices be informed by ideals. Due to the centrality of this claim let us refer to it simply as ‘the ideal claim’. For the purposes of this chapter we will want to separate the ideal claim into two further constituent claims. Let us call

¹ Unless otherwise stated ‘just choice’ implies ‘*generally* just choice’. There will be instances where just choices can be made without appeal to ideals of justice, and others where, despite possessing a sound ideal of justice, just choices will not be made. My claim is only that ideals are *generally* required to make just choices. It is unlikely that this claim could be defensible without an ‘in general’ caveat.

² While ‘ideal theory’ is the conventional terminology for this enterprise it is not uncontested. Alan Hamlin and Zofia Stemplowska for instance refer to ‘theories of ideals’. For a discussion of the distinction between ‘ideal theories’ and ‘theories of ideals’ see Alan Hamlin and Zofia Stemplowska, ‘Theory, Ideal Theory and the Theory of Ideals’ *Political Studies Review* Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 48-62 (2012), p. 53.

³ As I am largely interested in the normative aspects of nonideal theory, I will treat ‘normative’ as given, and employ the shorter ‘nonideal theory’ to refer to ‘nonideal normative theory’. This is consistent with the term’s usage from Rawls’s seminal discussion to more recent contributions to nonideal theory scholarship. For an overview of recent literature on nonideal theory, see Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift, ‘Ideal and Nonideal Theory’ *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy* (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2012).

the claim that ideals are necessary for short-term just choice, ‘the short-term ideal claim’ (SIC), and let us call the claim that ideals are necessary for long-term just choices, ‘the long term ideal claim’ (LIC).

One significant challenge to the former is presented by Amartya Sen,⁴ who claims that ideals can never help us know which of a range of choices yields the greatest increase to the current justness of society. Sen’s challenge to SIC ought to be taken seriously. If he is right, and ideals are not necessary for short-term just choice, then the *practical* value of political theory that proceeds from SIC will be significantly undermined. If we can generally make society more just without reference to ideals there is little or no practical need to theorise them. The particular appeal of Sen’s claim is that he presents an enticingly direct path to just choice. If he is correct then we will be able to make just choices without lengthy theoretical discussions about ideals nor the intricate methodological debates that accompany these.

While this discussion is necessary for a defence of the ideal claim more generally, in rejecting any approach that circumvents ideals, it also responds to a significant, if indirect, challenge to long-term choice in particular. We saw in the previous chapter why long-term choice is inherently more risky than short-term choice, but if, on top of this, Sen’s ideal-free approach is also valid then the *relative* riskiness of long-term choice versus short-term choice will become even more pronounced. If Sen is correct then long-term choice will be faced not only with an alternative that offers more immediate and guaranteed gains (as short-term choice does) but does so without the complexity of ideal theorising. For this reason it is necessary to respond to Sen not only in order to comprehensively defend the ideal claim but also to defend a long-term approach to just choice.

In disproving Sen this chapter will show why ideals are necessary for short-term choice. However to defend the ideal claim as a whole it is also necessary to show why ideals are required for long-term choice. LIC is philosophically less contentious than SIC: it is difficult to dispute the claim that, if the goal of political action is the realisation of an ideal, then we have to know what that ideal is. However while it is

⁴ Sen, pp. 214-238.

less susceptible to philosophical scrutiny serious questions can be asked about the practical feasibility of this approach. This includes the question of whether we ought to sacrifice probable short-term gains for speculative, and thus less probable, long term gains; an issue that will be addressed in Chapter 4. There I will outline some of the key conditions that are necessary if one is to justify adopting a riskier long-term approach to the ideal-nonideal theory relationship. For now it will suffice to show that both constituent claims of the ideal claim are valid. In doing this I am able to meet the first Key Objective of this thesis.

In defending the ideal claim I will first offer a short recap of Rawls's model of the relationship between ideals and nonideal theory, including an indication of the basic rationale underpinning the claim itself. Following this I will introduce Sen's objections to SIC (§ I). I will then address Sen's major claim that ideals are not necessary for short-term just choice, disputing this with reference to the distinction Sen fails to make between *internal* categories and *external* categories (§ II). I follow this with an anticipation of two possible critical responses to this position. I first argue that accepting that justice is an external category entails accepting the necessity of ideals (§ III). My second claim is that accepting this also entails accepting that theories of justice are necessary to order and rank individual principles (§ IV). Having defended SIC from claims that ideals are not necessary for short-term choice I proceed to challenge a series of objections Sen makes to the SIC on the grounds of the supposedly over-demanding nature of ideals (§ V).

Having addressed arguments against the *necessity* and value of ideals I then proceed to discuss Sen's claim that ideals are not *sufficient* for short-term choices. While I ultimately agree with this, I disagree with Sen's rationale. Sen claims that ideals cannot be sufficient for short-term just choice on the grounds that we also require a theory of distance to make such choices. However, I look to show that any conception of distance that we require for such choices will be inherent within ideals themselves (§VI).

The final substantive section of this chapter examines the validity of LIC, showing that ideals are also necessary for long-term just choices; on the grounds that we require ideals of justice to provide us with a goal towards which to orient nonideal political

decision-making. As with SIC, ideals are not *sufficient* for long-term just choice, and in the latter's case they are farther from being so than in the case of the former, with nonideal theorising playing a much more prominent role in long-term choices (§ VII). The discussion concludes that both constituent claims of the ideal claim are valid.

I. The Ideal Claim, the Practicality Critique, and Sen's Alternative to SIC

The majority of Rawls's work in political theory seeks to formulate and defend an ideal of justice.⁵ This ideal, 'justice as fairness', takes the form of the two principles that Rawls claims would govern the form and actions of a just society's political, legal, and economic institutions. The first principle states that people are to have the greatest individual liberty compatible with an equal liberty for all others. The second principle states that material inequalities are only acceptable when they are both (a) to the benefit of the least well off in society (i.e. the 'Difference Principle') and (b) attached to positions that are open and accessible to everyone.⁶ Were institutions to operate in accordance with these principles then society's 'basic structure', i.e. body of public institutions, would be just.⁷

An intuitive objection to Rawls's approach is that there is no practical, political value in ideals. Such arguments suggest that knowing the principles that would govern a just society is unhelpful when trying to improve unjust societies such as our own. This objection thus makes no claim about the veracity of ideals such as Rawls's but rather only how valuable they are given the dissimilarities between just societies and real ones. That is, even if we accept that the ideals formulated by Rawls, or others using

⁵ Comprehensive accounts of Rawls's ideal of justice are offered in John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, and John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). A concise version of his theory of justice is presented in John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. by Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁶ Rawls advocates *fair* rather than merely *formal* equality of opportunity. Fair equality of opportunity demands not only that people are not excluded from opportunities due to their race, gender, religion, and so on, but that people of the same ability and ambition are equally able to pursue opportunities. In short this entails policies that at the very least balance the unequal material starting positions of equally talented and ambitious individuals. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 63. For a discussion of fair equality of opportunity and how it differs from other conceptions of equality of opportunity see Richard Arneson, 'Equality of Opportunity' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2015).

⁷ For a statement of Rawls's principles of justice see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 53.

his approach, are true they are nonetheless irreparably disconnected from reality and are unable to inform our choices. We can call this line of criticism: ‘the practicality critique’.

The practicality critique is not a concern for theories of justice *tout court*. It would be unproblematic for those, such as G.A. Cohen, who do not see informing just choice as the discipline’s primary aim. Rather for Cohen, ‘the question for political philosophy is not what we should do but what we should think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference.’⁸ Cohen’s claim is that ‘truly normative question[s]’, and the ideals we offer in response to them, have no connection to questions of practicability, feasibility, and any other categories relevant to nonideal decision making.⁹ In short, we ought to aim to know what true justice is even if it does not help inform choices that make the world any more just.

However, as we saw in the previous chapter, this response is not available to Rawls. First, in Rawls’s view, political theory ought not to be concerned with merely improving our understanding of ideal justice but primarily with articulating ideals that can be of practical value to those wishing to make just choices. Second, Rawls states that the ‘urgent and pressing matters’ that we are confronted by are not those associated with determining which ideals reflect true justice, i.e. the focus of the majority of his own work, but rather real world problems of actual injustice, i.e. the concerns of nonideal theory.¹⁰ I am in full agreement with these two Rawlsian positions. It is thus necessary to respond to the practicality critique and demonstrate that ideals are a prerequisite for engagement with these ‘urgent and pressing matters’.

The ideal claim is essentially the central response to this critique. It states that if we do not know what justice demands then we will be unable to say whether or not given choices in the nonideal sphere benefit justice. This is why, for Rawls, ideals offer ‘the only basis for the systematic grasp’ of the problem of what we ought to do here and now.¹¹ As we have already seen, the ideal claim comprises two constituent claims. In

⁸ G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 268.

⁹ Ibid., p. 270. We will return to the question of this more epistemologically radical form of ideal theorising in the following chapter. See Chapter 3, Section III.

¹⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 8.

¹¹ Ibid.

the case of long-term choice the relationship is more intuitive. LIC states that ideals are necessary to provide the *goal* that nonideal decision-making aims to arrive at.¹² This entails doing what can be expected to make society *fully* just in the long term, rather than what will lead to optimal justice in the immediate future. SIC, which is concerned with the relationship between ideals and short-term choice, is, on the other hand, less simple, and prone to more philosophical criticism. To better understand this claim I will now turn to the most significant proponent of the practicality critique, Amartya Sen, and consider his alternative, ideal-free approach to short-term choice.

For Sen the fundamental difference between Rawls's approach to theorising justice and his own is that where Rawls believes that short-term just choice is predicated on possessing an ideal conception of justice, Sen argues that we can actually assess the relative justness of alternative political options *directly*, without the aid of ideals.¹³ Sen's aim then is to show that a focus on theorising ideals is misplaced and that in order to make short-term just choices ideals are neither necessary nor sufficient;¹⁴ claiming that they 'do not help at all' with nonideal decision-making.¹⁵

Sen notes that his critique does not undermine the worth of ideals of justice as a 'freestanding achievement.' This is to say that whether or not ideals are necessary or sufficient to make just choices they may yet be valuable for other reasons.¹⁶ However as stated above, while this would be unproblematic for those like Cohen, Rawls's position, and my own, requires that one can demonstrate that ideals have *practical* value. As such it is necessary to prove that Sen's claim, that we cannot make just choices with ideals but can make just choices without them, is invalid.

Sen distinguishes between two types of necessity, both of which he rejects, which can be seen as underpinning SIC. The first is a 'strong' necessity that states that ideals have

¹² See John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, pp. 89-90.

¹³ While I refer to Rawls's approach as 'ideal' and to Sen's as 'ideal-free', Sen's own article uses different terminology. Thus Rawls's approach is 'transcendental' and his own is 'comparative'. However, as what makes Rawls's approach transcendental is the fact that it involves employing an ideal to assist decision making at the nonideal level and what makes Sen's comparative is that it allows for ideal-free short-term just choice, I believe my substitutes are sufficiently synonymous with the original terms.

¹⁴ Sen, pp. 216-217. A similar claim is made by Elizabeth Anderson, who notes that 'knowledge of the better does not require knowledge of the best.' See Anderson in Knight, p. 362.

¹⁵ Sen, p. 221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

to be identified before ‘sensible’ comparisons can be made of available options. The second is a ‘weak’ necessity that states that even if strong necessity does not hold then we ought to be able to derive ideals from a series of just choices.¹⁷ The rationale that underpins the second type of necessity is the idea that if we can say whether we prefer *A* over *B*, and *C* over *D*, and *A* over *C* and so on, then eventually we would be able to determine, purely through a series of discrete just choices, what our *ideal* choice would be. In what follows I want to show that a form of strong necessity holds. While I find the idea of weak necessity to be plausible in itself I will not discuss this further in order to focus on strong necessity.¹⁸

II. Internal Categories and External Categories in Comparative Evaluations

To develop his claim that we do not require ideals to make short-term choices Sen likens theorising about justice to comparing the height of two mountains and evaluating the relative merits of two paintings. His claim being that just as knowing the world’s highest mountain or the world’s finest painting are not necessary for these comparisons, knowing what ideal justice demands is not necessary when comparing the relative justness of two nonideal options. He concludes with the general claim that ‘there would be something very deeply odd’ in thinking that one is unable to properly compare two things without first knowing what the ‘supreme alternative’ to those things is.¹⁹

Is this really so odd though? I believe Sen mistakenly proceeds from the true claims he makes about the uselessness of the external reference points he mentions in the mountain and painting examples to the false claim he makes about the *general* uselessness of supreme alternatives. I see no problem in accepting that the *Mona Lisa* is not necessary to evaluate the relative merits of a painting by Gauguin and a painting by Van Gogh, or that Mount Everest is not necessary to compare the heights of Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc; while disagreeing with the generalisation that Sen infers from these claims that when comparing two instantiations of a category it is

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁸ For a discussion of weak necessity see Miller, p. 235.

¹⁹ Sen, p. 222.

never necessary to know what the ideal instantiation of that category is. In explaining why his claims about paintings and mountains are correct I will show why these are not analogous with justice and thus unable to undermine SIC.

The validity of Sen's analogies rest on his being able to prove that in all of the cases he considers, *standards of comparison* can be provided by features that are *internal* to the things being compared. I use 'standards of comparison' to refer to the systems of measurement used when performing comparative evaluations. To illustrate this let us start with the Mount Everest example. As I have said, Sen is correct when he claims that knowing the height of a given set of mountains' highest peak does not help us know which of two different smaller peaks within that set is higher. Why is this the case? Well we may think of height as an *internal category*. In order to know what the category 'height' is we do not have to discover any particular instantiation of height or a perfect embodiment of height. Rather, height is a feature that is inherent within objects.

So if we want to know whether Kanchenjunga or Mont Blanc is higher, it is of no value to our project to know the height of Mount Everest or indeed any other peak. If we already have the relevant empirical facts, i.e. the heights of the two peaks, or the technical ability necessary to discover these facts, i.e. appropriate systems and tools of measurement, we can compare their heights. If we do not possess these things and the peaks are beside each other (although they are not in the case of Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc) we may be able to estimate on appearance which is higher. In no case though would it ever be helpful to refer to an external instantiation of height.

I think Sen would agree with this summary of the nature of height. The same could be said for many other categories such as 'weight', 'mass', 'velocity', 'population', and so on. These are all, similar to height, internal categories. However it seems clear that there are other types of categories that we might call *external categories* that *do* rely on external instantiations when comparing two or more other instantiations of a category. To illustrate this let us continue with our comparison of Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc but imagine that we are not interested in comparing the *height* of these two mountains but rather with comparing the *everestness* of them. Say that everestness is a category used to allow Mount Everest aficionados to measure different mountains

according to how similar they are to Mount Everest; the greater their everestness, the more similar they are to Everest, and therefore, the better.

As we have seen, in order to compare the different mountains we will require standards of comparison. Evidently the standards of comparison we require are not in this case inherent within Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc themselves. Rather we have to look to an external instantiation of everestness in order to find our standards of comparison. This external instantiation is our *ideal* of everestness. In this case this ideal is Mount Everest itself, as this is the only possible reference point we could use if we wanted to test how similar other mountains are to Mount Everest. Perhaps the standards of comparison take the form of sub-categories such as snowfall, height, and wildlife. Using these we could grade other peaks based on whether they have too much or too little snow in July, whether they are exactly 29,029 feet tall or disappointingly either smaller or taller than this, and whether they attract the same species of snow leopard that is found on Mount Everest. By referring to our ideal then we are able to establish, firstly what categories to use, and secondly how similar Kanchenjunga is to Mount Everest and how similar Mont Blanc is to Mount Everest in each category. With this information we are then able to see which peak is more ‘everistic’. This comparison then, unlike a comparison of the height of the mountains, necessarily requires an ideal.

External categories are thus defined by their reliance on ideals for standards of comparison. While everestness is a patently incredible external category it seems, contra Sen, that there may exist an extensive list of wholly credible external categories, and moreover that justice falls into this list. If this is the case then we will be unable to make short-term choices without ideals. Alternatively, if justice is, like height, an internal category, then we should be able to evaluate the justness of two options without reference to the demands of ideal justice, as the standards of comparison will be inherent within the options that are compared.

In what way might ideals be useful to nonideal theorists who want to make short-term just choices? Let us imagine a strict-egalitarian nonideal theorist, Ana, who is being guided by the ideal of full material equality. The society she strives to make more just is conveniently divided into three equal-sized groups of people: the unskilled, the averagely-skilled, and the highly-skilled. Ana is confronted by three immediately

available political options which yield different distributions of material wealth across society's three groups:

	<u>Unskilled Third</u>	<u>Averagely-Skilled Third</u>	<u>Highly-Skilled Third</u>
<i>Option A</i>	1	3	12
<i>Option B</i>	3	5	6
<i>Option C</i>	3	3	4

If Ana referred to her strict-egalitarian ideal she would likely conclude that just societies are those that have full material equality, perhaps due to the positive effects she expects this distribution to have on goods such as solidarity, happiness, and human flourishing. Having this information she may then decide that Option C, offering the distribution most similar to full material equality, would be the short-term choice. Option B would be her second choice as it would be more similar to full material equality than the distribution offered by Option A. By the same token we would imagine that Rawlsian nonideal theorists guided by the Difference Principle would select Option B (see §1), while those who associated justice with rewarding the talented or maximising societal wealth would opt for Option A.²⁰

How though can Ana know which option is most just if she does not have an ideal of justice? She will be able to see that different options yield different distributions with different levels of remuneration, equality, poverty and whatever else. However she has no way of translating these facts into a comparative judgement about the relative justness of these different arrangements. The standards of comparison cannot be found within the options being compared and thus the different distributions have no inherent meaning. The justness of political options then, like the everestness, but not the height,

²⁰ A more generalised version of this point is made by Pablo Gilabert when he observes that 'the principles underlying the perfect society should be relevant to comparing imperfect ones.' See Pablo Gilabert, 'Comparative Assessments of Justice, Political Feasibility, and Ideal Theory' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* Vol. 15, No.1, pp. 39-56 (2012), p. 44.

of mountains, is measured in terms of those political options' relative similarity to an ideal. Justice is thus reliant on ideals as we are only able to measure instantiations of justice through standards of comparison derived from ideals. Without ideals we simply cannot know what constitutes an increase or a decrease in justness.

III. The Necessity of Ideals of Justice

Somebody endorsing Sen's position at this stage may concede the point that justice is an external category and that therefore, when pursuing short-term choices, we require an external instantiation of justice in order to gain the requisite standards of comparison. However they may argue that accepting this does not entail that we have to accept the stronger claim that *ideals of justice* are necessary. Thus they may claim that we do not require ideals in order to make short-term just choices, as superior but imperfect, contemporary instantiations are sufficient.

To flesh out this gambit let us return to Sen's analogies, focusing this time on the example of comparing paintings. Recall that Sen claims that in order to know whether a Van Gogh is better or worse than a Gauguin it is unhelpful to know that the *Mona Lisa* is the world's finest painting. Once again he is quite right. However, unlike the internal category of height used in the mountain example, we can imagine that 'painting perfection' is probably an external category. It would be bizarre to think that an aesthetic category could be measured as simply as one would measure a descriptive category such as height or weight.²¹ In this instance then the problem is not, as it was with height, that an ideal of painting perfection is a red herring that does not exist in any form but rather that Sen exchanges whatever this ideal of painting might be with the clearly different instantiation: 'best existing painting'.²² Examining this analogy

²¹ This is not to say that people may not display reactions to art that give the impression that artistic categories are internal. Indeed people may have very intuitive and automatic responses to pieces of art. However it should be kept in mind that an *intuitive* reaction like this can still rely, subconsciously on external standards of comparison. The precisely same logic applies to intuitive moral judgements.

²² It is at least logically possible of course for the best *existing* thing to be identical to the ideal, i.e. the best *possible*, thing. It is unlikely though that even if the *Mona Lisa* is the best painting in the world that it is also the best painting that could possibly be painted.

allows us to draw out the problems that will confront the critic of SIC who wants to argue that external instantiations need not be ideal.

Before proceeding I would like to address a major, intuitive weakness of this criticism of SIC. Recall that ideals provide us with standards of comparison that tell us which sub-categories are relevant to a category and provide a benchmark from which we can determine how well non-ideal instantiations of the category are performing. A serious and well-founded concern may thus be that without an ideal instantiation of a category we are unable to even know which of a set of actual instantiations the best existing instantiation is. Evidently this is a fact we need to know in order to arrive at a non-ideal instantiation to be used to compare lesser instantiations. This is a major problem, but in order to identify some of the other errors in the ideal-free position it is necessary to bracket this concern for the moment.²³ As such we will assume for just now that we *can* say which of a given set of instantiations is the best existing instantiation without reference to an ideal.

So why then might it be otherwise problematic to replace ideal with ‘best existing’? Firstly it is very unlikely that any best existing painting will not be in some sense flawed, and may indeed be weaker in certain aspects than the, all things considered, inferior painting it is providing standards of comparison for. Accepting for argument’s sake that the *Mona Lisa* is the world’s finest painting we can still imagine that it may have poorer brushwork than Van Gogh’s *Sower* and less interesting use of perspective than Gauguin’s *Vision after the Sermon*. If this is the case then we cannot rely on the *Mona Lisa* to provide standards of comparison by which we can evaluate either the relative strength of the brushwork or use of perspective of the two otherwise inferior paintings. Moreover we can easily imagine that some feature that is important to the paintings under consideration may not be manifested in any form in the *Mona Lisa*, rendering it even more deficient as an external reference point.

Let us extend this logic to the question of justice. Imagine a world comprising three societies, *A*, *B*, and *C*. Now, imagine that we have an ideal that emphasises the equal importance of civil liberties and economic equality, and from this ideal we are able to

²³ For a thorough discussion of bracketing methods in philosophy see Chapter 5, Section I’s discussion of abstracting idealisations.

assess how societies perform in each sub-category according to a five point scale running from very weak (one point) to very strong (five points). From the perspective of this ideal imagine that *A* is the most just society. It is very strong on civil liberties though weak on economic equality (thus scoring seven points in total). *B* is, from the perspective of the ideal, the second most just society. It is strong on economic equality but very weak on civil liberties (scoring five points in total). Finally *C*, is the least just society, being neither strong nor weak on civil liberties but very weak on economic equality (scoring four points in total):

	<u>Civil Liberties</u>	<u>Economic Equality</u>
<i>Society A</i>	5	2
<i>Society B</i>	4	1
<i>Society C</i>	3	1

Now imagine that we are comparing *B* and *C*, but rather than using our hypothetical ideal we are using the best existing instantiation of a just society, i.e. *A*; remembering that for now we are bracketing the very serious question of how we are to know that *A* is the best instantiation of justice without reference to an ideal! Using standards of comparison from *A* we would have to say that *C* is the more just of the two as its stronger civil liberties make it more similar to *A*. As *A* has weak economic equality we cannot use it to compare the respective achievements in economic equality of *B* and *C*, even though it is the relative strength in this category that means that it is actually *B* which is overall the more just of the two societies. By relying on ‘best existing’ instantiations for standards of comparison then we risk blunting our comparative evaluations and making significant errors of judgement.

Indeed if we were to derive standards of comparison from best existing instantiations of categories then the resultant conservatism would disable critical thought. In political theory we would be unable to choose courses of action that reached beyond current standards.²⁴ In the case of Ana the strict-egalitarian it would perhaps make it

²⁴ For a discussion about unduly conservative political theory, and ways of avoiding it see Pablo Gilabert and Holly Lawford-Smith’s discussion of ‘cynical realism’ in Pablo Gilabert and Holly Lawford-Smith, ‘Political Feasibility: A Conceptual Exploration’ *Political Studies* Vol. 60, pp. 809-825 (2012), p. 815.

impossible for her to be a strict-egalitarian, as no strictly-egalitarian societies currently exist. Irrespective of one's thoughts on the benefits of full material equality there would surely be many desirable ideals of justice that would be made irrelevant to short-term choice if we were to restrict ourselves to the best existing, rather than the best *possible*, instantiations of justice.²⁵

Let us now return to the serious question we bracketed at the start of this section. Recall that we considered the concern that without ideals we would be unable to know which of a set of instantiations the best existing instantiation of that category is. In other words, without an ideal of justice we could not say which existing society is currently the most just society in the world. Thus even if we choose to employ non-ideal external instantiations we will still rely on ideals to tell us what those non-ideal instantiations are; whether we are aware of doing this or not. It appears then that the choice is not between using ideals and not using them but rather on consciously using ideals or unconsciously using them. If we assume we can do without ideals then we will be still be using them, only doing so in a non-reflexive manner. Failing to theorise ideals then will lead to standards of comparison that are more likely to be deficient in some sense. If this is the case then it will be sensible to engage with our short-term choices in the most rigorous and prepared manner possible, and we can only do this by consciously drawing on ideals.

IV. The Necessity of Theories of Justice

Although the necessity of ideals of justice for short-term just choice has now been established, critics may still argue that SIC does not hold. One might claim that even if ideals are necessary we only need discrete individual categories of justice rather than *theories of justice* that explain the order or ranking of those individual categories. To illustrate this problem let us again consider the painting analogy.

We know that we require ideals because non-ideal external instantiations are not sufficient for good comparative judgements. What type of ideal might we employ

²⁵ We will return to consider this discussion from the perspective of the assumptions that ideals are derived from, rather than the ideals themselves, when discussing idealisation in Chapter 5.

then? Well, we can imagine an artist who would be able to combine a brilliant artistic mind with an analytical clarity of expression in order to describe exactly what an ideal painting would look like. Somebody reading the artist's account of this ideal could then piece together in their head how this hypothetical painting would look. From this abstract idea of an ideal painting, art critics, along with the brilliant and analytical artist herself, could derive the standards of comparison necessary to compare works by Gauguin and works by Van Gogh.

While this scenario is not strictly beyond the realms of imagination I think most people on reflection would be doubtful that such a system could ever be put into practice. First, we may think that a process like this would be too demanding on people's capacity for abstract visualisation. In order for this to function as an ideal people would have to be able to picture the painting in their minds and then use this to compare the merits of sets of actual paintings. It may be though that this is simply beyond the cognitive abilities of most, if not all, human beings. Second, we may also be doubtful that we can say with any confidence what 'best possible' is when it comes to aesthetic categories. It seems probable that the value we attribute to art is too closely connected to contextual and subjective factors.

However, accepting the validity of these concerns need not entail rejecting the use of ideals in aesthetics or accepting that the category 'perfect painting' is internal rather than external. Instead, we may use individual categories rather than ideals holistically embodied in a single hypothetical painting. We still need ideal categories such as form, tone, brushwork, and so on to make sense of the relative merits of the works in question; even if, in response to the second concern, these are quite contextual categories, perhaps sensitive to the artist's aims and contemporary standards. We can then evaluate the relative merits of actual paintings using these ideal standards.

If we think that ideal aesthetic categories are necessarily discrete and individual in nature we may worry that the same holds for justice. What if theories of justice place implausibly high demands on our capacities for abstract reasoning and this forces us instead to employ a series of discrete and individual ideal categories? If this is the case then we face a problem. If we are unable to process a theory of what a just society demands and instead only use individual categories then we will be unable to rank the

relative importance of different ideals. We would lack a theory that gives us a conception of the priority or hierarchy of certain ideals over others. To illustrate, imagine three societies, each of which has fully realised a different aspect of Rawls's ideal. One has secured the principle of greatest equal liberties, another the principle of fair equality of opportunity, and another the Difference Principle.²⁶ Without a theory of justice we would be unable to rank the societies by justness.

Fortunately there is little reason to believe that aesthetic categories such as perfect painting and political categories such as justice are the same in this respect. Crucially for one, politics is a naturally verbal practice. Constitutions and legislation are written down, parliaments host debates, and political analysis is largely expressed in the written and spoken words of commentators. Due to this characteristic of politics we have the experience, concepts, and vocabulary to talk about prospective political systems without placing unrealistic demands on our capacity for abstract reasoning. There is no translation problem involved in politics as there may be in art as ideals do not have to be converted from abstract images into words and so on. The ready intelligibility of the systems of governance of utterly incredible societies outlined in works of fantasy and science-fiction illustrate how we are able to grasp governing principles and ideals of justice that are entirely divorced from reality. As such there is no inherent problem in similarly codifying ideal conceptions of justice, such as Rawls's, which are generally written with far greater clarity and with greater fidelity to the world and its inhabitants as they are at present.

Therefore we have no reason to reject the possibility of theories of justice that allow us to not only measure individual categories but to weigh up the relative value of different principles.²⁷ Thus in the case mentioned above, we would be able to use Rawls's 'lexical' ordering of his principles of justice, to state that the society that has secured the liberty principle is more just than the society that has secured the fair equality of opportunity principle, which is more just than the society that has secured

²⁶ Again, see Section I above for a brief statement of Rawls's ideal of justice.

²⁷ Martijn Boot makes a similar point when contrasting 'one-dimensional' categories such as height with 'multifaceted' categories such as justice. See Martijn Boot, 'The Aim of a Theory of Justice' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* Vol. 15, pp. 7-21 (2012), pp. 11-12.

the Difference Principle.²⁸ By the same token, the concern that we might be unable to rank categories in artistic comparison is perhaps also overstated. There is no reason that a theory that provided the ideal categories required for comparing paintings could not also have some rules in place to state which categories are generally more significant than others.

Before concluding our discussion of necessity we should consider a final possible counter argument to SIC. Laura Valentini suggests that Sen may be right to claim that in *some* instances at least we may not require ideals in order to inform short-term choice. Thus she asserts that ideals are not necessary to know that a society with arbitrary arrest is worse, other things being equal, than one without it.²⁹ One immediate response to this could emphasise that SIC, and the ideal claim more broadly, only rests on our proving that ideals are *generally* necessary for just choice, and therefore it is able to survive Valentini's endorsement of Sen.

However this response may overlook the more significant threat that this argument poses to SIC. This takes the form of a slippery slope, whereby conceding that there exist some apparently obvious cases in which we do not require ideals to make just choices will lead us to concede far more. To this we can say, as shown above in Section III, that we *always* rely on ideals when we make short-term choices. Thus even when our choices are made without conscious consideration of any robustly theorised ideal, some form of intuitive ideal is at work. In these circumstances surely it is better to think reflexively and consciously rather than intuitively or unconsciously. While in some instances, failure to do this will not lead to us making unjust or otherwise poor choices, it is likely that in most matters of justice we ought to be equipped with robust and well theorised ideals.

²⁸ For Rawls's discussion of how lexical priority should be used to inform short-term just choice see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 216. For commentaries on this see A. John Simmons, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 5-36 (2010), §§ 2-3, and Laura Valentini, 'A Paradigm Shift in Theorising about Justice? A Critique of Sen' *Economics and Philosophy* Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 297-315 (2011), p. 308.

²⁹ Valentini's acceptance of Sen's claim is a critical one, namely that Sen ends up 'proving too much' by showing not only that we do not need ideal theory to make these judgements but that we do not need any theory at all. Thus for Valentini, Sen invalidates the contribution that both Rawls's approach and his own approach are able to make to the matter of 'obvious cases'. See *ibid.*, p. 306.

This response seems to be consistent with Martijn Boot's thoughts on this point. Boot claims that we ought not to confuse a lack of discord with a lack of ideals. It is not that ideals do not underpin judgements but rather that on certain issues all reasonable approaches will be in agreement on a particular issue.³⁰ However as Boot also rightly notes, we ought not to assume that this will generally be the case. Political theory tends to be most useful when it is urgent; we need ideals of justice to help us make sense of difficult problems, and conceding that we may not need complex ideals for smaller problems need not mean accepting that they are anything less than vital in general.

These points aside, focusing only on the theoretical necessity of ideals may risk overlooking the important *instructive* role that they play. Even when they are not necessary to tell us *what* we ought to do, ideals will often be vital in helping us understand *why* we ought to do what we ought to do. Choices that are merely intuitively obvious to us may not be obvious at all to others and it may be necessary to explain why our intuitions are correct. Even moral positions that are widely accepted at present may not be in the future. While Valentini and Sen are right that we do not need full ideals for all short-term just choices, we should also remember that they are always beneficial in helping us and others understand exactly why these choices ought to be seen as obvious. We might think that the benefit of this is not only that it helps understand specific moral positions but that it also preserves a healthy and reflective attitude towards moral and political decision-making.³¹

To summarise the discussion thus far. We have seen that justice is an external category, and that therefore when making short-term choices it is necessary to refer to an external instantiation of justice. We also saw that this external instantiation has to take the form of an ideal as non-ideal instantiations of justice will be unable to provide the standards of comparison required to arrive at just choice. Following this we discussed why we also require a theory of justice to help us make sense of the values of the constituent principles of this ideal if and when they conflict with each other. For these reasons we

³⁰ Boot, p. 10.

³¹ There is a similarity here with John Stuart Mill's desire that valuable truths not become 'dead dogmas'. See John Stuart Mill, 'On Liberty' in *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Considerations on Representative Government, and Selections from Auguste Comte and Positivism*, ed. by H.B. Acton (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1859/1972), pp. 95-96.

can assert that SIC, that is, the claim that ideals are generally necessary for short-term just choice, holds.

V. Are Ideals Prohibitively Demanding?

Having discussed why ideals are necessary for short-term just choice, we can now turn to consider some other possible issues with SIC. These criticisms are not designed to show that ideals are not necessary for short-term choice but rather that the claim is problematic for other reasons. A major concern here is that if these objections stand then while SIC will remain the only possible route to short-term just choice, it may be one that is at best challenging and at worst politically disabling. We will consider three criticisms offered by Sen that he believes show the advantages that his ideal-free approach has over SIC. The first is that with SIC we are unable to criticise the immediate injustices of problems such as famine or gender equality without first clarifying meticulous and possibly irrelevant details such as the exact rate at which income tax would be set in an ideal society. The second is that as ideals demand institutions that may be beyond the scope of some societies, such ideals would be unable to inform short-term choice. The third criticism is that disagreement over ideals may stand in the way of agreement over short-term choice, and as such if we did not have to theorise ideals there would be fewer obstacles to improving justice.

The first criticism seems to have plenty of intuitive force. We do not want to be unable to say anything about current injustices until we have a complete conception of ideal justice. Moreover, if ideals are this demanding we may find that we are unable to *ever* proceed to long-term choices, as we will not be able to find sufficiently satisfactory or widely accepted solutions to every possible question regarding the governance of ideal societies.

Thankfully we can be sceptical that this attack truly hits its target. First, it is doubtful that Sen is aiming at a faithful representation of the Rawlsian approach to ideals being defended here. Recall from our earlier discussion that Rawls's own conception of justice does not provide precise details on exact levels of taxation but rather general principles that establish the framework that stipulates the acceptable boundaries of,

among other things, taxation policy. He does not specify whether ‘a top income tax rate of 45 percent [is] more just or less just than a top rate of 46 percent’,³² but rather that inequalities of wealth have to benefit the least well off, with any implications this may have for what is to count as an acceptable rate of taxation.³³ Rawls has good reasons for avoiding the specificity that Sen attributes to him. The former believes his principles are compatible with a range of different socio-economic systems such as property-owning democratic states, liberal socialist states, and welfare-state capitalist states.³⁴ This generality, which Rawls sees as a strength of his approach, would not be possible if every detail of just governance had to be specified at the outset. Rather his approach provides scope for different types of socio-economic systems to determine how best to realise his principles based on their specific social and historical circumstances. Rawls is not willing to connect his principles of justice to a single model of ownership, let alone to specific rates of taxation. If Sen’s representation of Rawls is correct then the latter’s conception of justice would be at best only applicable to a single society and at worst too specific for any society.

Avoiding dealing with the minutiae of governance at the ideal level is generally sensible as changing conditions will make different rates of taxation preferable at different times. We can imagine that even societies that fully adhere to principles of justice may have to alter rates of taxation. Technological changes that increase or decrease the costs of redistributive policies or increase or decrease social solidarity may lead to necessary changes in taxation rates that are nevertheless consistent with the principles of justice that govern policy-making. This does not mean that the fine details do not have to be ironed out at some stage, only that this is largely a task for nonideal theory rather than ideal theory.

There is no reason to think that it is only liberal egalitarian ideals of justice that can be or should be versatile. Differences in historical circumstances and so on also mean that

³² Sen, p. 223.

³³ See Valentini, ‘A Paradigm Shift’, p. 304.

³⁴ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. xiv-xvi and pp. 247-248. For a more detailed discussion of how Rawls’s principles might function within different socio-economic systems see Martin O’Neill and Thadd Williamson (eds.), *Property Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2012) and Martin O’Neill, ‘Liberty, Equality, and Property-Owning Democracy’ *Journal of Social Philosophy* Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 379-396 (2009).

the form which any ideal might take at different times, in different societies, and being advanced by different groups and individuals, will be highly varied. As Al Campbell remarks on forms of socialism in particular, ‘there were many different types of slave societies, many different types of feudalism and many different specific types of capitalism [...] many different forms of socialism are possible.’³⁵ Rawls aside then, the general conceptualisation of ideals of justice defended here is still as sets of principles that establish the general parameters that just policies and institutions ought to adhere to. As such, Sen’s over-specificity criticism holds neither for Rawls’s ideals nor for any conception of ideals that this thesis recognises.

What then of Sen’s second criticism, that ideals require ‘a plethora of institutions’, and that often these institutions put an ideal beyond the reach of some societies?³⁶ Ignoring the fact that we have just seen why ideals may be less demanding than Sen claims they are, there is a fundamental mistake here. Sen seems to make a category error in stating that this rules out ideals of justice in general. If it *is* the case that an ideal requires the establishment of certain institutions that are beyond the possible reach of particular societies then this only rules out using this ideal in conjunction with LIC, i.e. long-term choice. This would be on the grounds that the full realisation of justice, which is the objective of this enterprise, would be rendered impossible. The short-term approach that Sen engages with on the other hand would still be able to issue recommendations on the grounds that even if an ideal was unachievable one would still be able to state how similar different options would be to the ideal.

To illustrate, let us consider Ana and her strict-egalitarian ideal once again. Let us imagine that she has two options, one that lowers society’s Gini coefficient to .3 and another that raises the Gini coefficient to .6. Now let us assume that the society she is choosing for lacks the incredibly strong state needed to reach and preserve a Gini coefficient of zero and that what is more this society will never be able to achieve this state.³⁷ Now while this may prevent Ana using this ideal to inform long-term choice,

³⁵ See Al Campbell, ‘Designing Socialism: Visions, Projections, Models’ *Science & Society* Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 140-146 (2012), p. 141.

³⁶ Sen, p. 226.

³⁷ In fairness to this hypothetical society, a state like this might be beyond *any* society’s institutions. A state that was able to ensure that no single individual ever possessed a single penny more than any other

it should not prevent her using it to inform short-term choice. Indeed it seems to be very clear that guided by this ideal she will pick the first option as it will make society more similar to the strict-egalitarian ideal. Infeasibility then is not necessarily an obstacle to short-term choice.³⁸

More generally, Sen's claim that possibly permanent knowledge gaps, such as uncertainty about the feasibility of ideals, are especially threatening to ideal formulation is likely overstated.³⁹ The problem of making sound normative statements without full information is of course a significant problem, but it is a significant problem for political theory in general, and there is no reason to think that it is more of a challenge for ideal theory than it is for Sen's ideal-free approach, let alone an argument in support of rejecting the former in favour of the latter. The solution, it would seem, is to focus on theorising information and gaps in information as fully as possible so ideal theory methods are as robust as possible.

Sen's third criticism is that disagreement about ideals can stand in the way of agreement about shorter-term choice, and that if we set aside questions of ideals we will be able to engender greater consensus.⁴⁰ Sen is logically correct here though it paints a somewhat pessimistic picture of political theorists as being either too dim-witted or too stubborn to set aside their disagreements at more abstract levels and acknowledge their agreements at more concrete ones. Even if we assume Sen is correct we would only succeed in *postponing* the inevitable clash when people who otherwise would have disagreed at the level of ideals end up disagreeing at a more advanced stage in the process of making short-term choices. To use a simplified example, Robert the right-wing libertarian and Gerald the socialist may have profound disagreements about what an ideal society would look like but both readily agree that when offered a choice between an economic policy of slavery and one of capitalist wage-labour, the latter option would undoubtedly be optimal in terms of its short-term justness. However later, when they have to decide whether to retain the system of capitalist

individual seems very improbable indeed. However as this is a purely hypothetical point I won't pursue this question of feasibility further.

³⁸ This discussion is continued in the following chapter where I consider the different ways that infeasible ideals can inform short term just choice. See Chapter 3, Section IV.

³⁹ Sen, p. 223.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 225-226.

wage-labour or move towards a system of socialist production, they are likely to find themselves in intractable disagreement.

More significantly, Sen's claim overlooks other important aspects of the nonideal theorising process. While it does involve deciding which political options are preferable it also involves questions about the methods that are acceptable to achieve ends as well as how we ought to allocate finite political resources. Assume that Robert and Gerald, having established a system of capitalist wage-labour, are in agreement that the new most pressing goal ought to be treating a number of epidemics that a large proportion of the population are afflicted with. However where Robert believes that healthcare should be purchased in the same manner as other goods or insurances, Gerald believes that health care should be nationalised. This disagreement may mean that Robert and Gerald are unable to agree on how to deal with the problem, as they will each have different ideas about the resources that ought to be allocated to each problem. Indeed they may not even be able to agree on what resources are available due to fundamental differences on subjects such as taxation, state borrowing, monetary policy in general, and so on. These insurmountable obstacles to consensus on the matter of short-term just choice are not only caused by Robert and Gerald's radically divergent ideals of justice but also due to their disagreement at the level of nonideal theory.

In short, it is optimistic to assume that a shared agreement about the importance of a particular goal necessarily implies a shared agreement about political practice. Thus even if Sen is right about the difficulty of setting aside disagreements about ideals, we may find that if we bracket ideals, consensus will still be quickly blocked by other obstacles.

Just as Sen is unable to show that ideals are not necessary for short-term choice he is also unable to show that they are prohibitively demanding. Far from needing exhaustive ideals in order to engage in nonideal theory, the normative force of ideals comes, in part, from there being generalisable. Similarly, even excessive institutional demands do not render ideals inapplicable to short-term choice even if they may render those ideals inapplicable to long-term choice. Finally, assuming that bracketing ideals

will allow political theory to bracket disagreement overlooks the distinction between short-term just choice and political strategy.

VI. Sen's Insufficiency Claim

Thus far I have tried to show that, contra Sen, ideals are necessary for just choice and that by extension Sen's ideal-free approach is unable to arrive at just choices. Recall though that Sen also claims that ideals are not *sufficient* for short-term choice. Now as SIC states that 'ideals are *necessary* for short-term just choice', its validity does not rest on the success or failure of Sen's insufficiency claim. Nonetheless it is worth considering Sen's argument, partly as it helps us better understand SIC and partly as I believe that ideals are closer to being sufficient for these choices than Sen claims.

Sen asserts that for ideals to be sufficient for short-term choice they would need to provide, unaided, 'rankings of departures from justness in terms of comparative "distances" from perfection.'⁴¹ That is, ideals would have to provide the means to tell us how far from justice a society would be if a given action was carried out. For Sen there is nothing inherent within an ideal that tells us how to calculate the extent to which nonideal configurations deviate from it. His own ideal-free approach to just choice on the other hand is of course tailored for such calculations.⁴²

To evaluate Sen's claims, let us return again to our hypothetical strict-egalitarian Ana. Recall that Ana's strict-egalitarianism in Section II led her to select Option C, on the grounds that the distribution it led to was closest to full material equality. At the time we treated this decision as unproblematic. However there are various reasons why this might not be the case. Let us begin by considering what kind of ideal Ana's strict-egalitarianism might be. We can imagine that it may be an *incremental* ideal, where each move towards the ideal improves the justness of society. Ana's ideal would be incremental if it were the case that as a distribution becomes more equal, happiness, solidarity, and human flourishing all increase.⁴³ If this is the case then each step

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 219.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Assuming that these are all indicators of increasing justness.

towards full equality will make society more just,⁴⁴ and therefore for Ana, more equal societies will always be preferable to less equal societies. Thus her ideal will be able to unproblematically inform her short-term choices.

However what if in Ana's case full material equality is an *absolute* ideal, where the ideal is only desirable if realised in full? Perhaps Ana still expects skyrocketing solidarity, happiness, and human flourishing will occur with material equality, but *only* when it is achieved fully, and not at all before. If Ana's ideal is of this second kind then it may be that one, or even both, of the other, superficially *less* egalitarian, options is preferable.

A second reason would be if the applicability of the ideal was pegged to some external factor. For instance, it may be in Ana's case that strict-egalitarianism is an incremental ideal but that the benefits of it only apply in societies where nobody is living in poverty. If with Option C, the unskilled would be impoverished by the wealth distribution, then it might again be the case that another option would be preferable to Ana.

One might assume that these examples show us that we require some kind of separate theory of distance that mediates between ideals and choices. Mark Philp's concern that ideals alone do not tell us what to do in nonideal circumstances is a claim of this type.⁴⁵ On this view we need this additional type of theory to tell us whether Ana does or does not want the option that brings us closest to full material equality. While this is a tempting conclusion it may place the onus to provide a theory of distance on the wrong enterprise. Rather than requiring an additional theory of distance it seems that what Ana needs is a more precise set of ideals. She needs to know whether her ideals are incremental or absolute and whether or not they are desirable irrespective of the levels of societal wealth. In some cases she may also require a secondary theory that tells her which principles to adhere to when her primary strict-egalitarian ideal is unable to offer recommendations. In short, if Ana's ideals were more thoroughly theorised then she

⁴⁴ A more technical way of expressing this would be to say that justice and inequality are inversely correlated: a society becomes more just when that society's Gini coefficient is lower, and less just when that society's Gini coefficient is higher.

⁴⁵ Mark Philp, 'Political Theory and the Evaluation of Political Conduct' *Social Theory and Practice* Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 389-410 (2008), p. 391.

would be able to say which of the available options was, in terms of her ideal (or one of her ideals), preferable.

A response to my position may concede this point but suggest that it overlooks unavoidable questions of distance that an unaided ideal-based approach cannot answer. One might assert that distance is not only about *similarity* to an ideal but also *closeness*. To illustrate what I mean by these terms, consider a choice that makes society more similar to an ideal but also makes it harder for that society to fully realise the ideal, i.e. makes it less *close* to the ideal. We can readily imagine situations where immediate improvements in the justness of society slow down or reverse progress towards full justice. Perhaps one set of actions is politically ‘exhausting’ and having performed it people no longer have the desire for further change. Alternatively it may be a psychological fact about people in general or people in certain societies that they will only strive for full justice when conditions are sufficiently poor, and therefore, gradual improvements away from poor conditions are likely to make people complacent. I do not want to claim that either of these theories are necessarily valid, I only use them to illustrate a probably irrefutable truth that at least in some instances a choice that yields greater similarity to an ideal may not yield greater closeness. Sometimes short-term just choices can undermine long-term just choices.

While distance is indeed a matter of both similarity and closeness, the latter category does not apply here. Rather, it is only relevant if one is pursuing long-term choices, not the short-term choices that Sen is interested in. If we are only interested in doing what makes society immediately more just, then similarity is the only relevant category of distance. Questions of closeness only become relevant if we are interested in the long-term full realisation of the ideal.

Does this mean that short-term just choice is not reliant on nonideal theorising? This would be too strong a claim. The question of what we ought to do given nonideal circumstances is inherently a matter for nonideal theory. In responding to this question nonideal theory also has to marshal a set of theories and models that can help us understand what specific nonideal circumstances there are, whether or not they can be

altered to make society more compliant to ideals, and how we might do this.⁴⁶ The question, ‘what should we do?’ even when informed by ideals, remains one for nonideal theory. As such it is wrong to claim that ideals are sufficient for short-term choice. As Gilabert rightly notes ‘no reasonable defender of ideal theory would try to show that it provides, “on its own,” a solution to “all comparative issues”’.⁴⁷

However, ideals are not insufficient for the distance-based reasons that Sen suggests, or that we might infer from his comments. Evaluating distance as similarity does not require an additional theory either within nonideal theory or to mediate between ideals and nonideal theory. Rather, the problem and its solution are internal to ideals themselves and are concerned with (a) better understanding the type of ideals our choices about justice are premised on and (b) ensuring that we know whether we will require alternative ideals and what they are when we anticipate that our first choice ideal will be unable to inform short-term choice. Evaluating distance as closeness on the other hand is simply not an issue for short-term choice, concerned as closeness is with choices that aim towards the eventual full realisation of an ideal rather than making society immediately more just.

VII. Are Ideals Necessary or Sufficient for Long-Term Just Choice?

Thus far we have seen that SIC holds and that therefore ideals are necessary for short-term just choice. We now turn to the question of whether the other constituent aspect of the ideal claim holds, i.e. LIC, that ideals are necessary for long-term choice. As with the above discussion of SIC I will also consider the related claim that ideals may be sufficient for long-term choice.

Recall that with long-term choice we are not interested in making choices that lead to an immediate increase in the justness of society but rather with choices that lead to the eventual full realisation of an ideal. The necessity of ideals in this process ought to be

⁴⁶ Aspects of this discussion are taken up, albeit pertaining to ideal theory rather than nonideal theory, in Chapters 3 and 4.

⁴⁷ See Gilabert, ‘Comparative Assessments of Justice’, p. 44.

clear. If long-term choice is premised on moving society towards an ideal then it is obviously the case that we require an ideal in place in order to do this.

To illustrate this, let us turn again to Ana the strict-egalitarian, imagining that she now wants to make the choice that will be best for justice in the long-term. For the purpose of this example let us treat Option C as the definitively optimal choice from a *short-term* perspective. What though if Option C is a choice that would turn out to be politically exhausting for society, while Option B, although making society less immediately similar to the ideal, would have the opposite effect? Perhaps the road to Option C is more demanding than the road to Option B. Alternatively perhaps the proximity to the ideal causes a sufficient number of people to settle for things as they are rather than push for change. For any of these reasons we might find that Ana may make a different choice when approaching nonideal theory from the perspective of long-term choice than she would from the perspective of short-term choice. When adopting the former perspective, the category of distance that becomes relevant is closeness rather than similarity. As this example shows, greater similarity need not be concomitant, though it often will be, with increased closeness to justice.

One might suggest that this approach may be susceptible to the criticism that we do not actually require ideals in order to engage in long-term just choice, but rather we only require any instantiation of justice that can fulfil the requisite target setting role. Instead of aiming to achieve full justice we could aim for a more realistic short-term goal that would increase the justness of society without realising justice in full. Once this was achieved we could set another sub-ideal goal, and then another and so on. The ideal could thus even be achieved without necessarily using an ideal itself until we were much closer to reaching it.

Several points can be made in response to this. First, we want to avoid the problem of path dependence. If our target is achieving a particular medium-term increase in justice we might find that in achieving this we are not as close to justice as we would have been had we been working towards the ideal all along. Second, we ought to avoid falling into the trap of assuming that full justice is over-demanding or highly improbable. As the following two chapters will argue, ideals of justice that are consistent with long-term just choice ought to be feasible and sensitive to a range of

necessary and contingent facts about human beings and societies. Working towards an ideal need not mean engaging in hopelessly optimistic political decision making. Third, as we saw above, we can only know what sub-ideal instantiations of justice are because we know what full justice is. Thus when not using an ideal as a target, long-term choice would, necessarily, still be reliant on ideals.

Another question might be whether a *theory* of justice is necessary for long-term choice. Recall that we use theories of justice to rank the importance of different discrete principles. For example, faced with a choice between otherwise equal improvements in liberty or equality, we require a theory of justice to tell us which discrete ideal is more important. While we can accept their necessity for short-term choice, we might be doubtful of their necessity for long-term choice.

In response to this then one can point out that if we have no way of discerning between the relative worth of different discrete ideals then we will be unable to properly direct our political choices. Steps that would represent an enormous achievement in the journey towards realising a society that emphasised the importance of individual liberty first and happiness second may be a disastrous set-back in the journey towards realising a society that emphasised the importance of happiness first and individual liberty second. We thus need to have a conception of priority when making long-term choices.

Ideals of justice are thus, at least, as necessary for long-term choice as they are for short-term choice. As such both constituent parts of the ideal claim hold. It is likely the case that LIC is the harder claim to disprove. As noted above it is unsurprisingly difficult to defend the logic of the claim that we do not require an ideal if we want political choice to be oriented towards the realisation of an ideal. As such, ‘ideal-free’ alternatives to LIC, in the fashion of Sen’s alternative to SIC, are likely to be thinner on the ground.

In the previous section we saw that ideals were perhaps nearer to being sufficient for short-term choice than Sen claimed. The same is likely not the case with long-term choice. It is true that it is important that we have a clear idea of what our ideal is in order to be sure that our choices will lead us towards this and not some other, less

desirable outcome. However in the case of long-term choice we are interested in distance as closeness. Here closeness refers to how much nonideal ‘space’ we have to cover before we can expect to achieve our ideal. As such we require a nonideal theory of distance to help us calculate how far we are from the ideal, that is, the different obstacles that stand in the way of full realisation. Without a detailed nonideal theory of distance then we will be unable to make long-term choices. We also require a nonideal theory of transition to tell us what to consider when making decisions, e.g. ‘how do we know which issues are most urgent?’, ‘how do we determine which actions are acceptable means to achieve our ends?’, and so on.

This point highlights the error in too readily assuming that we ought to pursue long-term, rather than short-term, choices. The choice is not simply between small gains and large gains but rather between more probable small gains and less probable large gains. Chapter 4 will return to the question of the theoretical criteria that have to be met in order for long-term choice to be a prudent option.

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to show that if we want to make just choices it is generally necessary to refer to ideals. In defending SIC, I disputed claims made by Amartya Sen that ideals were unnecessary for short-term choice. I did this by examining the analogous reasoning Sen employs to challenge SIC. This showed how Sen fails to distinguish between internal categories such as height and complex, external categories such as justice; which result in his analogies being invalid. I then addressed two possible criticisms of SIC by showing that justice requires ideals as well as theories of justice to order and rank competing principles.

I then defended SIC from claims that ideals are in various ways over-demanding. Here we saw that, contra Sen, ideals necessarily have to be open to historical and contextual interpretation. Sen was similarly mistaken in his claim that institutions being beyond the reach of poorer societies invalidate the ideals that require them; as this would only hold in some instances where we were interested in *long-term* just choice. The final criticism of Sen’s I addressed here was that bracketing ideals allows us to sidestep

disagreement; showing instead that Sen overlooks the distinction between just choices and choices about political strategy; and that even if people agree on the former point, cooperation may be prevented due to disagreement on the latter point.

My discussion of SIC concluded with the claim that while Sen is correct that ideals are not sufficient for short-term choices, this is due to the general need for nonideal theory when making political decisions. It is not due to the inability of ideals to respond to questions about distance.

I then showed that the philosophically less contentious claim that ideals are necessary for long-term just choice also holds; indeed it is possibly an axiom that if we wish our choices to lead to the realisation of an ideal, we have to possess an ideal to make those choices. However I rejected the further claim that ideals are sufficient for long-term choice, stressing the relatively greater importance of nonideal theory for such choices.

Having shown that the ideal claim holds in both forms I intend to have demonstrated why the alternative approach, offered by Sen, is ultimately flawed. Moreover in doing so I have sought to meet the first Key Objective of this thesis, namely to prove that it is only when choices are informed by ideals that we are able to consistently make just choices.

As it is the case that ideals are a prerequisite for just choice it is prudent that these ideals are as robustly theorised as possible. For the sake of simplicity and clarity this chapter has operated with an intentionally abstract and partial conceptualisation of ideals, however if we wish to formulate ideals that will be up to the task of informing just choice then it is necessary to build on this conceptualisation. With this in mind Chapter 3 will now proceed to discuss how ideals ought to be theorised, and the conditions that they have to meet in order to inform both short-term and long-term just choice. Of particular significance here will be the role that feasibility constraints will play in theorising the ideals that are to inform long-term choice. Equipped with a more thorough understanding of ideals, Chapter 4 will return to the pertinent question of whether theories of justice ought to be structured on the more cautious terms of SIC or the more ambitious but risky terms of LIC; seeking to identify the conditions that have to hold for us to favour the latter.

3. Informing Just Choice

In the previous chapter I defended the *ideal claim*, that is the claim that ideals of justice are generally necessary for just choice. Throughout that discussion ideals were conceptualised in an abstract and pared down manner; only as conceptions of the rules that would govern political decision making in a just society. In employing this simplified model of ideals the discussion was not clouded by the complexities that come with more concrete conceptualisations of ideals, and I was better able to bring into relief the tension between the ideal approach I defended and Sen's ideal-free alternative. However, having now shown that ideals of justice are required to inform both short-term just choice and long-term just choice, it is necessary to build on this hitherto abstract conception of ideals. Doing this will allow us to respond to questions concerning the conditions ideals actually have to meet in order to perform this just choice informing function.

As may be imagined, what these conditions actually consist of will differ according to the type of just choice that the ideal has to inform, and thus standards that hold for short-term choice may not hold for long-term choice; and vice versa. The previous chapter highlighted the differences in these types of just choice and their relationship with ideals. For this reason I will not look to identify any general conditions that ideals have to meet but rather the conditions specific to each type of just choice.

We will see below that understanding the distinction between *feasible* ideals and *infeasible* ideals is crucial to identifying these necessary conditions. Where feasible ideals are those which meet certain standards of possibility, probability, and stability, infeasible ideals do not. The former are largely normative and practical, designed primarily to inform just choice, while the latter are ostensibly evaluative, designed primarily to improve our understanding of the abstract concept of justice. The first aim of this chapter is to offer a preliminary analysis of the above feasibility conditions, and show why ideals have to meet these conditions if they are to inform long-term choice. The second aim is to show that the branch of ideal theory concerned with infeasible

ideals is compatible with, and poses no challenge to, the branch concerned with feasible ideals. Moreover, I want to show that despite being unachievable, infeasible ideals can still be of practical value as they will generally be able to inform short-term choice.

In defending these claims I will meet the second Key Objective of this thesis, that is, to demonstrate the conditions ideals have to meet in order to perform ideal informing functions. In establishing the necessity of feasibility for long-term just choice this chapter also lays the foundations to address the third Key Objective in Chapter 4. As we shall see, in order for long-term choice to be defensible over short-term choice the ideals that are used to inform the former have to meet stringent feasibility conditions.

I will begin by restating, and then expanding on, the understanding of ideals presented in Chapter 2 (§ I). I will then offer preliminary definitions of the key feasibility conditions of possibility, sufficient probability, and stability, and explain why it is necessary for ideals to meet these conditions if they are to inform long-term choice (§ II). The next section will turn to the question of infeasible ideals. Here I want to show that such ideals are not conceptually incoherent and nor do they pose a practical challenge to the feasible ideal approach (§ III). Continuing the discussion of infeasible ideals I will proceed to show that infeasible ideals can still be of normative value in informing short-term choice (§ IV). The final substantive section of this chapter will bring the infeasible ideal approach to bear on the feasible ideal approach in considering the ‘uncertainty gambit’; this is the claim that in conditions of uncertainty it may be better that ideals of the former type, rather than ideals of the latter type, inform long-term choice. Here I am particularly interested in how certain key aspects of Marxist theory may be used to support this claim. I will reject this challenge though, arguing instead that uncertainty ought to push us towards, rather than away from, feasibility conditions (§ V).

I. Defining Ideals

In the previous chapter we saw that ideals of justice establish the range that just laws fall within. We also saw that ideals often comprise a number of principles that are

responsible for particular aspects of governance. To illustrate the form that ideals take, consider again the Rawlsian ideal outlined in Chapter 2.¹ There we saw that Rawls's 'Difference Principle' engages with the distribution of material wealth and states that material inequalities are only just when they benefit the least advantaged in society. Related to this principle is Rawls's empirical assumption that societies with wealth inequalities can produce more wealth in total than strictly egalitarian societies. This is due to the belief that if people are able to retain a percentage of the wealth they generate then they will be incentivised to work harder in order to generate greater personal wealth. If a portion of the additional 'incentivised' wealth is then redistributed to the least advantaged then this group will be better off (in absolute terms) in an unequal society than they would in an equal one. Hence this inequality, and whatever tax-law produced it, would be in adherence with the Difference Principle.²

Recall from the previous chapter that the Difference Principle only requires conformity to certain patterns of wealth distribution.³ As such the means through which wealth is gathered to be redistributed, be it income tax, wealth tax, property tax, transaction tax, etc. is an open question. As indeed is the question of whether the Difference Principle is best met by conventional *redistribution* or rather some form of *predistribution*. The latter aiming for more equitable ownership and control of property and means of production in part as an alternative to conventional redistributive methods of adhering to patterns of distribution.⁴ From the example of the Difference Principle then, we can see that ideals of justice display a number of characteristics. Fundamentally they establish the range that just laws fall within. They may be reasonably inclusive in their scope, being compatible with a range of contexts and laws, and potentially, as is the case with the Difference Principle, a range of institutional-systems.

¹ For a summary of Rawls's ideal of justice and its constituent principles see Chapter 2, Section I.

² For Rawls's account of the Difference Principle see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Ch. 2, § 13. For more critical perspectives on the Difference Principle see for example Lawrence Crocker's egalitarian response in 'Equality, Solidarity, and Rawls' Maximin' *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 6, pp. 262–266 (1977); John C. Harsanyi's utilitarian critique in 'Can the Maximin Principle Serve as a Basis for Morality? A Critique of John Rawls's Theory' *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 594–606 (1975); and Robert Nozick's libertarian objections to Rawls and non-voluntary redistribution of wealth in general in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974/2013), esp. Ch.7.

³ See Chapter 2, Section V.

⁴ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, xiv–xvi & 247–248.

As we shall explore in greater detail shortly, a distinction can be drawn between feasible ideals and infeasible ideals. Ideals of the former type have to meet particular standards of possibility, probability, and stability. An ideal that was impossible, insufficiently probable, or would be unstable in practice would fail to meet feasibility conditions, and we might think this to be problematic for various reasons that will be considered below. Ideals of the latter type alternatively need not meet any of these conditions. As we shall see, while this latter approach is subject to criticism, it can nonetheless be both epistemically *and* practically useful.

Before exploring these two forms of ideals further a question of terminology ought to be addressed. One might claim that feasible ideals of justice are not ideals that would govern the most just society we can imagine but only the most just society that is possible, sufficiently probable, and stable. As such, one may ask whether such a limited conception of justice or indeed any other concept is best described as ‘ideal’. It may be felt that the conceptualisation of ideal used in this section is at best counter-intuitive and at worst contradictory.

One response to this is to consider one of the ways in which ‘ideal’ is commonly used outside of philosophy in everyday English. By way of example consider the following case. Somebody suffering from toothache phones her dental surgery and on being offered an appointment that same morning responds that the time offered to her would be ‘ideal’. By this the toothache sufferer is implying that this is the outcome she hoped for when she made the phone call. However it is evidently not the best outcome that she could have imagined. It would have been better, though highly improbable, if the receptionist told the toothache sufferer that her mediocre dentist had been replaced by the best dentist in the country and that this new wonder-dentist’s services were provided free of charge. It would be better again, though very likely impossible, if toothache simply ceased to exist, without the need for treatment of any kind. I believe that this example highlights that there exists, in everyday English, a sense of ‘ideal’ that is used to describe those outcomes that are the best one could hope for *given certain constraints*.

This sense of ideals as not necessarily referring to the best conceptions of things that we can imagine has been noted by others as well. Alan Hamlin and Zofia Stemplowska

for example assert that ideals of justice can be used to state what the best ideal is ‘under some particular non-ideal conditions.’ What they refer to as ‘a local maximum.’⁵ Similarly, Pablo Gilabert claims that one of ideal theory’s functions is looking ‘beyond certain social settings towards morally more desirable ones’, irrespective of whether these are ideals ‘with respect to which no moral improvements are possible’.⁶

Conversely, there are also other, non-philosophical uses of ‘ideal’, which are employed to refer to things that are *far less constrained* by feasibility. This is perhaps especially, but by no means exclusively, the case with derogatory uses of ‘ideal’ that dismiss ideas and policies on the grounds that they are unrealistic. For example, more cooperative systems of governance or more egalitarian patterns of distribution are frequently dismissed on the grounds that they are ‘mere ideals.’

I do not point to either everyday usage in order to justify my choice of terms but rather because I believe these examples are instructive. They show how ‘ideal’ can be used to refer both to the best outcome that we can reasonably hope for given either the situations we find ourselves in or due to other limitations we impose on our theorising; or indeed to those aspirations that may fall under the heading of either hopeful optimism or hopeless pipedreams. In short we are discussing a reasonably inclusive term that admits both feasible and infeasible ideals.

What connects these two types of ideals is that both are concerned with establishing the most ethically desirable outcome within given boundaries. This is the case whether these boundaries are drawn in a very strict manner, tightly constrained by what is deemed feasible, or in a much freer sense with little or no regard for feasibility. Either way, it is *this* aspect of ideals, as conceptualising the most desirable outcome, that this thesis treats as essential. For this reason it seems acceptable to refer to both as, different types of, ‘ideals’. If this nomenclature is *not* acceptable though this should not be an issue. If only one of these concepts are fit to be classed as ‘ideals’ then the other concept can be termed something else. Although I believe that this is not the case I am ultimately interested in the categories and concepts themselves, not the terms used to refer to them. The character of feasible ideals and infeasible ideals, as well as the

⁵ See Hamlin & Stemplowska, p. 52.

⁶ Gilabert, ‘Global Justice and Poverty Relief’, pp. 417-418.

relationship between them is unchanged if one of them is termed something other than ‘ideal’.

II. Feasible Ideals and Just Choice

Having clarified this matter of terminology I can now proceed to properly address the category of feasible ideals. In this section I want to demonstrate why for an ideal to be able to inform long-term choice, it has to be *possible*, *sufficiently probable*, and *stable*. The rationale behind this claim is intuitive. As long-term choice aims at the eventual full realisation of a given ideal, it is necessary that the ideal in question is possible and sufficiently probable, i.e. can realistically be achieved, and there would be little point in pursuing it if the ideal could not be expected to be durable over time, i.e. stable.⁷ How then ought one to understand the above three feasibility conditions? In what follows I will define each category in turn and outline how they relate to the feasibility of ideals.

The *possibility* condition requires that political laws that adhere to an ideal do not violate laws of nature or laws of formal logic. To put this differently, an ideal is possible if we can imagine it informing political laws that could be put into practice in the best conditions that we believe could ever hold. To remain with our above example, the Difference Principle discussed is undoubtedly possible because political laws informed by this principle could be implemented without violating laws of *nature* or laws of formal *logic*.⁸ We might also consider this ideal to be, at least apparently, plausible if for no other reason than that many developed economies already possess the institutions necessary to implement it in some form.

⁷ For an example of a defence of a feasibility-based approach to conceptualising ideals see Anderson, p. 377.

⁸ Mark Jensen draws a similar distinction in his discussion of possibility in referring to ‘logical possibility’ and ‘nomological possibility’ with the latter term essentially referring to a given thing not violating laws of nature. See Mark Jensen, ‘The Limits of Practical Possibility’ *The Journal of Political Philosophy* Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 168-184 (2009), p. 170.

To extend this point let us consider an ideal that is often considered to be less plausible – Marx’s conception of communism.⁹ Distribution of material goods in Marx’s communist society is to be governed by the principle ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’.¹⁰ We shall call this ‘the Communist Ideal’. This implies that people contribute to the communal pot as best they are able and in turn take what they need from it, with people’s level of contribution in no way affecting their entitlement to need-satisfying goods. It seems that for such an ideal to function, the society governed by it would have to meet one or both of the following conditions. First, a subjective condition requiring all individuals to be significantly altruistic and honest, to ensure they will willingly work to contribute to the common good irrespective of the contributions of others, and to do so in the occupation that is most beneficial to society as a whole, rather than the occupation that they find easiest or most enjoyable. Second, an objective condition of material abundance where technology has developed to the point where levels of production allow individuals to take what they wish without depriving others of those things. Due to the marked subjective and objective differences between this ideal of communism and both historical and contemporary societies many will doubt that this society could ever be implemented.¹¹ However it is still possible in the sense that people may one day become sufficiently altruistic and honest or technology may become sufficiently productive as to allow for a society that adheres to this ideal.

Contrast these ideals with one that states that a just society must always act to protect the equal enjoyment of the greatest number of individual rights and always act to maximise net utility. Unlike both the apparently plausible Difference Principle and the apparently implausible Communist Ideal, it is likely that we can say that this third ideal

⁹ This thesis adopts the common distinction of referring to Marx’s ‘first phase of communism’ as ‘socialism’ and referring to his ‘higher phase of communism’ as ‘communism’. For Marx’s original discussion of socialism and communism see Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1875/1970), p. 11. For an early and influential discussion of this particular nomenclatural approach to communism and socialism see Lenin’s discussion of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, ‘The State and Revolution’ in *V.I. Lenin, Selected Works, Vol. VII: After the Seizure of Power (1917-1918)* ed. by J Fineberg (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., 1937), p. 84.

¹⁰ Marx *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, p. 11.

¹¹ G.A. Cohen for one believes that Marx’s reliance on a ‘technological fix’ providing the abundance that a functioning communist society would require has been significantly undermined by recent developments in ecological science. See G.A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 127-128.

would be flatly impossible.¹² Its impossibility stems from the fact that it is premised on a logically contradictory principle that could not be satisfied. Laws that protect the equal enjoyment by all of the greatest number of rights would lead to lower utility; while laws that maximise utility would likely require the violation of the rights of some or all citizens.¹³ Having seen how this ideal would contradict laws of formal logic, we could also contrast the above two possible ideals with any further ideal that would require time travel, immortality, or some other condition that violates a generally accepted law of *nature*.

It should be clear that hypothetical, impossible ideals such as those mentioned above are unable to inform long-term just choice. If long-term choice aims to realise a society where laws fully adhere to the conditions set out by a given ideal conception of justice, then the ideal conception of justice in question must be able to be adhered to. An ideal that fails to satisfy the possibility condition clearly cannot perform this function.

Satisfying the possibility condition then requires that ideals not violate logical and natural laws. The *sufficient probability* condition requires that ideals not only be possible but also meet some established threshold of likeliness. This is to say that one should be able to have a sense that with sufficient political action there would be an acceptable probability that the ideal in question could be realised. A useful way of understanding probability more generally is of a given possible event occupying a position on a spectrum between zero and one, with zero referring to things that are completely improbable that will not happen, and one referring to things that are completely probable that will happen.¹⁴ Establishing where on this spectrum

¹² I do not want to discuss whether either ideal is actually more or less plausible than the other at this stage, though I do consider the plausibility of the Communist Ideal in Section V. For the purpose of this claim I merely want to show how plausible and implausible ideals can both be possible.

¹³ We ought to take this logically impossible ideal as being premised on a deep and irrevocable meta-ethical contradiction between rights and utility. This is to say that the rights-based ideal I have in mind is suitably comprehensive and not merely a utility-based ideal dressed up as a rights-based ideal, as would be the case in an ideal premised on a claim such as: 'every individual has a right to live in a society that maximises utility.' The reverse also holds in that the utility-based ideal is not one where optimising utility simply demands that we adhere to some given comprehensive framework of rights. The tension I want to draw out in this example is thus not merely semantic but logically fundamental and thus necessarily irrevocable.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Brennan, 'Feasibility in Optimising Ethics' *Social Philosophy and Policy* Vol. 30, No. 1-2, pp. 314-329 (2013), p. 323. Holly Lawford-Smith discusses a similar conception of probability in, Holly Lawford-Smith, 'Non-Ideal Accessibility' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 653-669 (2013), pp. 656-657.

sufficiency would start is of course a difficult and inevitably subjective task. However, irrespective of the precise way this is fleshed out, what is clear is that we want our assessment of ideals to ‘set the bar at the proper height’ at a threshold ‘very much greater than zero.’¹⁵

Using sufficient probability we can imagine that a distinction may be drawn between the Difference Principle and the Communist Ideal. Where with the former one may think that the ideal is sufficiently close to reality to be achievable, in that it does not require any significant technological developments or radical attitudinal shifts, with the latter one may worry that it is too demanding on one or both of these accounts. As such it may be the case that while both ideals satisfy the possibility condition, only the former meets the sufficient probability condition, while the latter does not. Though we can map out with some confidence how to move from society at present to one that adheres to the Difference Principle, we lack this confidence when mapping a move from society at present to one that adheres to the Communist Ideal. Given the low probability of achieving the latter ideal one might argue that it does not meet the sufficient probability condition and thus cannot be used to inform long-term choice. We will return to the question of the Communist Ideal and feasibility in Section V.

Before proceeding to discuss the final feasibility category, stability, I would like to address two possible objections to my conceptualisation of possibility and probability. First, one might assume that as the probability of an ideal being achieved decreases, so does the possibility of that ideal being achieved; with the same correlation holding for increases in probability. For this reason it may seem reasonable to treat possibility and probability as different terms within the same concept. If this is the case we do not really need to make the distinction I do between the two terms. A counter to this assumption is offered by David Estlund, who stresses the essential conceptual difference between the two terms. To illustrate how such an essential difference holds Estlund uses the example of his dancing like a chicken while giving a lecture.

He notes that while it is highly improbable that he will ever do this it is certainly not impossible. That is to say he is physically able and has sufficient awareness of what

¹⁵ Brennan, p. 324

dancing like a chicken would entail. Let us imagine that his willingness to dance like a chicken is determined by how good or bad the morning has been prior to his afternoon lecture. Yet however good or bad his morning has been and thus however more or less probable it is that he will dance like a chicken, the possibility of this happening remains the same. The dance does not become more possible when he has had a good morning, nor less possible when he has had a bad morning. The possibility of the dance happening is fixed and is independent of its probability. Probability is a matter of degrees inasmuch as it measures the extent to which it is likely that something will happen, whereas possibility is categorical inasmuch as something is either possible or impossible. While we can speak of things being ‘slightly probable’, ‘extremely improbable’, and so on, it is nonsensical to speak of something as being ‘slightly possible’ or ‘extremely impossible’. The probability of an event happening is a question of the likelihood that it *will* happen, while the possibility of an event happening is a question of whether that thing *can* happen.¹⁶

A second challenge to my conceptualisation of possibility and probability is to suggest that I might allow the latter to encroach upon the proper domain of the former. Some may see my definition of the realm of possibility as too parsimonious, drawing as it does only on logical and natural possibility, while, for the most part, placing questions of human nature and its limits under the auspices of probability. Others, such as Mark Jensen, outline alternative conceptions of possibility that actively incorporate discussion of ‘natural human abilities’. Jensen rightly stresses that human abilities are categorical issues: it either is, or it is not, possible for humans to do certain things. Clear cut examples of the former include the human ability to possess a sense of justice, while clear cut example of the latter include humans living without sustenance. However outside of these ‘paradigmatic extremes’ he observes ‘a great deal of space in the middle where we do not have a clear sense of human abilities.’¹⁷

I take Jensen’s point to be emblematic of a general concern about human nature and how we theorise it when formulating ideals. This concern is that we cannot know if human beings are capable of sufficiently high levels of a particular, relevant set of

¹⁶ David Estlund, ‘Utophobia’ *Philosophy & Public Affairs* Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 113-134 (2014), pp. 118-119.

¹⁷ Jensen, p. 173.

characteristics as to make certain ideals, such as the Communist Ideal, possible. The high levels of altruism and honesty required by the Communist Ideal may seem, to many, to be beyond the scope of human nature. Indeed some will also believe that the less demanding and state-enforced form of redistribution required by socialism may also be too much to bear for human nature.¹⁸ Given these concerns, why then do I treat these questions about the limits of altruism, honesty and so on, as matters of probability rather than possibility?

I place these within the domain of probability because although the ‘paradigmatic cases’ are uncontroversial issues of possibility, the other cases that sit in the middle ground between these are not questions of possibility at all. We know it is a fact that humans necessarily require oxygen and sustenance; this is part of the essential characteristics of humans *qua* animals. When we make these statements we know that they can be safely applied to *all* human beings. However when discussing subjective qualities such as altruism and honesty and their limits, we cease to speak in universal terms. This is because the world both at present and in the past contains many individuals and even small-scale societies that embody very high levels of qualities of the desirable sort listed above.

As stressed above, while possibility is concerned with what *can* happen, probability is concerned with whether something *will* happen. It is unquestionably the case that people can possess the requisite levels of altruism and honesty required for ideals such as the Communist Ideal, the pertinent question is rather whether it is sufficiently probable that people will ever possess these qualities in the numbers required to sustain a society that adheres to this ideal. Put slightly differently it is not a question of whether human beings are sufficiently altruistic and honest for communist society or indeed sufficiently altruistic and honest for socialist society, but whether it is sufficiently probable that sufficient numbers of people will display such characteristics as to allow either or both of these societies to function.

¹⁸ Cohen’s concerns about the viability of an economy built on generosity is an instructive example of this type of concern about socialism. See G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 56. For a suggestion of what a socialist ideal may look like see Chapter 1, Section II.

I feel then that it muddies the waters of possibility to introduce questions about the limits of human subjectivity. These are questions of probability. On the other hand, those questions about human capacities that refer to universal physiological processes, for example the need for sustenance and air, are appropriately questions of possibility and indeed sit comfortably within the existing category of natural laws.

This brings us on to the final condition: *stability*. What does it mean for an ideal to be stable? In essence an ideal is stable if a society whose legislation adheres to it is durable over time. A more technical perspective is offered by Rawls who defines a stable society as one that is able to return to an ‘equilibrium state’ following any deviation from stability. While all societies will be prone to instability, the test of a stable society is its capacity to ‘elicit forces sufficiently strong to restore these equilibria’.¹⁹ When we talk about an *ideal* being unstable, we are referring to whether the necessary effects of implementing that ideal make the society that implements it irredeemably unstable.

To illustrate this let us consider two ways in which an ideal might be *unstable*. We may imagine that certain ideals, although possible and sufficiently probable, would be over-demanding, perhaps requiring that people commit to unsustainable levels of taxation or have to dedicate too much of their time to social projects. Thus while the laws the ideal informs may appear bearably demanding at first, they may strain compliance over time. We can also consider a similar but significantly different cause of instability where continued implementation of the law actually creates or compounds compliance issues. In the first instance then the negative effects of the law are unchanged, it is merely that they become less bearable over time. In the second instance there may be few or even no negative effects from a law at first, yet over time the law tends to produce or compound negative effects that make continued compliance to it difficult.

To illustrate the latter stability concern, consider the implementation of laws that adhere to Robert Nozick’s entitlement theory of justice. For Nozick, an individual has a just entitlement to a ‘holding’ (i.e. money or property), provided that holding is voluntarily given to her by another individual or group, call this ‘the Entitlement

¹⁹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 400.

Ideal'. For this reason, all taxation, except that required to pay for minimal public judicial institutions, is unjust, as taxation occurs without the consent of the taxpayer.²⁰ By extension of this premise the role of the state is confined to that of a 'night-watchman', existing to protect contracts and adjudicate disputes, rather than to provide its citizens with other public goods such as healthcare, education, and welfare.²¹ Even assuming that the Entitlement Ideal would be wholly welcome at first we might still have concerns that the laws (or absence of laws) that it informs, would, over time, become excessively demanding. As any distribution premised on free transactions would be just, there would be nothing to prevent wealth being increasingly held by fewer and fewer individuals.²² Moreover, if such a concentration of wealth did occur there would be no public welfare system to act as a safety net to supplement the income of the poor. We might also be concerned that without free education or healthcare increasing numbers of people would be unable to pay for private provision of these services. This might then lead to greater numbers of people suffering and dying from preventable diseases, whilst also entrenching poverty and minimising the available 'escape routes' out of poverty for the disadvantaged. All of this may in turn have more widely felt consequences such as low supplies of skilled labour and low levels of effective demand, due to widespread poverty.²³

Of course these apprehensions about an Entitlement Ideal informed state may be invalid. It might be the case that the market would guarantee high levels of employment, and with it low poverty, high effective demand and so forth. Alternatively it may be that wealthy individuals would be sufficiently philanthropic as to provide what would in wholly or partially socialised economies be publicly provided goods.²⁴ However if one thought it likely that the above problems would emerge from

²⁰ See Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Ch.7, §1

²¹ Ibid., Ch. 3, esp. pp. 27-28, and Chs. 4 and 5.

²² For some explanations of why wealth might become concentrated overtime see for example Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the 21st Century* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: London, 2014), esp. Pt. 3, and Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1* (London: Penguin, 1867/1976), p. 777. Marx's argument on capitalism's tendency to lead to concentrations of wealth will be considered in the following chapter. See Chapter 4, Section III.

²³ Nozick himself was concerned that his entitlement theory of justice may over time yield significant and potentially 'unfair inequalities'. See Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (London: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1989), p. 30.

²⁴ J.K. Galbraith offers one example of a critical response to such assumptions about the provision of goods and social equality through market mechanisms. See his remarks on 'trickle down theory' or 'the

implementing laws that adhered to the Entitlement Ideal and that society would not be able to generate the forces required to return itself to an equilibrium state then we would say that such an ideal was unstable. The high-costs that accompany the Entitlement Ideal may lead to demands for laws that adhere to a different ideal of justice, perhaps one that involves a ‘patterned’ principle of distribution such as Rawls’s Difference Principle, which seeks to establish limits on what a just distribution of wealth is.

The first stability concern that I briefly considered above ought to be reasonably easy to anticipate, as ideal theorists need only ask whether one can expect that individuals will be able to tolerate a particular law, with fixed costs, over time. The second stability concern on the other hand involves more variables, asking the ideal theorist to consider the long term effects of a particular policy, and whether it generates additional costs over time. As such it requires the application of explanatory theories in order to best model these effects. In the case of the Entitlement Ideal we would have to consider various economic and social theories that explain the effects that deregulated markets and a flat rate on minimal taxation have on factors such as wealth distribution and what these in turn mean for other factors such as healthiness, educational attainment, unemployment and so on. For this reason stability concerns of the second type ought to arise more regularly, as concerns of the first type may be easier to anticipate and definitively respond to.

Before moving on from questions of stability, it is important to state that a *ceteris paribus* condition holds when we discuss stability. This is to say that there are a number of types of factors that can cause a government to replace a law that adheres to a particular ideal with a law that does not. Notably, external factors beyond the control of the government in question such as ecological pressures and geo-political and global-economic forces may force it to abandon a policy that it would otherwise have retained. The point that I hope is brought out in the example of the Entitlement Ideal is how, in an important way, it is the ideal that generates its own stability

horse and sparrow theory’ in John Kenneth Galbraith, ‘Recession Economics’ *New York Review of Books* (February, 1982).

concerns; they are not a product of external or contingent factors but are rather a necessary product of the ideal itself.

The question of measuring and assessing stability with regards to ideals will be considered in the following chapter.²⁵ At present it is sufficient to state that for an ideal to be stable it is necessary that, all other things being equal, a society that adheres to that ideal will be able to continue adhering to it over time and that departures from stability caused by that ideal can be sufficiently overcome or remedied as to return the society to an equilibrium state.

The case for expecting long-term ideals to meet stability conditions is an intuitive one. There is little point striving to realise an ideal that will not be durable over time. However one may still object to labelling stability a ‘feasibility’ condition, on the grounds that ideals that are not stable are not literally infeasible. Commonly understood, feasibility refers to whether something can and will happen, essentially mapping directly onto possibility and probability respectively. The sense of ‘feasibility’ used here is thus somewhat idiosyncratic in being extended to encompass stability as well, and is selected due to its being preferable to alternative, possibly more awkward expressions such as ‘fact-sensitivity’ that come with their own ambiguities and definitional issues as well. What is most important though is that in order for an ideal to be able to inform long-term just choice it has to be possible, sufficiently probable, and stable. Feasibility is thus a convenient, if imperfect, term for referring to this set of conditions.

Let us recap our discussion thus far. For an ideal to be possible it must not require that the political laws that it underpins violate laws of logic or nature. In order for an ideal to be sufficiently probable, the likelihood that, with the correct political action, it can be achieved needs to meet some established threshold. Finally, for an ideal to be stable, laws that it informs must be durable over time in society being able to return to an equilibrium point following any destabilising events that are a necessary product of the ideal itself.

²⁵ See Chapter 4, Section II.

In arguing how important it is that ideals be informed by robustly theorised feasibility conditions it may be claimed that I am conflating ideal theory and nonideal theory, by having the former concern itself with issues that may conventionally be considered to be properly within the domain of the latter. However, this is not the case. Ideal theory remains concerned with determining the ideals of justice necessary to inform just choice, and nonideal theory remains concerned with making these just choices in order to bring society closer to realisation of the ideal. I am not claiming that it is necessary for ideal theorists to actually plot the precise journey from contemporary society to ideal society; this remains the task of nonideal theory. What I am claiming is that in order for ideal theory to produce ideals that can inform long-term choice, it is necessary that we can show that such a course can be plotted.

This broad claim about the necessity of feasible ideals for long-term choice will not go unchallenged. In Section V I will consider, and ultimately reject, a possible challenge to this claim premised on an alternative approach to long-term choice in which it is informed by infeasible ideals. However as this discussion requires a preliminary discussion of infeasible ideals more broadly it is necessary to address this first.

Before proceeding to the following section I would like to offer a further point of clarification. I noted at the outset that the conception of ideals being discussed in this chapter is more concrete than that employed in Chapter 2. However for the sake of clarity I have continued to bracket certain issues that affect actual ideals, and thus my conceptions of both feasible and infeasible ideal are still abstract in certain senses. First I bracket questions about discrepancies between the intentions of theorists and the character of the ideals they theorise. We can imagine that a theorist may intend to produce a feasible ideal of justice but unbeknownst to her actually produces one that is infeasible; perhaps her conception of stability or sufficient probability is too generous and no society could reasonably be expected to adhere to laws governed by her ideal. Such an error may significantly undermine her theory as her ideal would be unable to properly inform long-term choice. The exact same issue may hold for infeasible ideal theorists who unwittingly pollute their infeasible ideals with consideration of feasibility categories. In order to simplify this discussion we can

assume that ideal theorists achieve what they set out to achieve. In doing this we also bracket for the moment the difficult question of establishing what is and is not a stable ideal, or a sufficiently probable ideal, or even a possible ideal, and instead simply assume that ideals meet or do not meet necessary conditions.

Another issue to be bracketed is how close a given infeasible ideal is to being feasible or vice versa. By way of example, consider two abstract infeasible ideals of justice. The first is clearly unachievable; each of its principles is far beyond the capabilities of any possible human society, and even if a society governed by it could somehow be realised it would collapse within minutes. The second on the other hand would be achievable but for the fact that each of its principles were just slightly too demanding, that is, a society would be able to *virtually* satisfy each principle but never satisfy them in full.

I think we can agree that the first ideal would be an inadequate basis for long-term choice. The ideal can never be achieved because the distance between nonideal reality and the ideal is too great. This is to say that even our best efforts could not bring us any nearer to realising the ideal in full. Indeed in this situation it may be that the ideal is so far-fetched that we might struggle to even determine distance. With the second ideal though, the principles can be all but realised in full and, assuming we are talking about an incremental ideal,²⁶ the distance from the ideal that could potentially be reached would be very small in terms of closeness. In this instance we can very nearly realise the idea in full.

We can likely say then that there is no reason that the latter ideal could not do a very good job of informing long-term choice, essentially by performing the minimal theoretical work required to convert it from an infeasible ideal into a feasible ideal. However for the purposes of this discussion the infeasible ideals we are interested in are those like the former, which are unable to inform long-term choice. This of course provokes the question of where the line can be drawn between ideals that can inform long-term choice and ideals that cannot. This concern though, along with the questions

²⁶ Recall from the previous chapter that incremental ideals of justice are those where each increase in a given metric improves the justness of society. For example, an incremental strict egalitarian ideal would entail that society would become more just with every step towards equality. See Chapter, Section 7.

regarding authorial intent, is bracketed in order to bring into relief the *essential* characteristics of feasible and infeasible ideals of justice. These still partially abstract conceptions of both types of ideals are better suited to our discussion of their relative, and possibly also competing, merits. Having clarified this point we can now turn to our discussion of infeasible ideals.

III. Infeasible Ideal Theory and Its Critics

As we saw in the previous chapter, for certain theorists, some ideals ought not to be judged by their capacity to inform just choice but rather by how they contribute to our understanding of a particular concept.²⁷ We considered the example of G.A. Cohen, who claims that certain ideals of justice can tell us what a pure notion of justice is, independent of that ideal's possibility, probability or stability.²⁸ Let us call this approach, 'infeasible ideal theory', to contrast it with the 'feasible ideal theory' discussed above.

The need to discuss the former approach may seem surprising. The previous section explained that it is *feasible* ideals that we require if we wish to inform long-term just choice. We also know that the third Key Objective of this thesis is to show the viability of such long-term approaches, and that I generally want to emphasise the special political urgency of long-term choice *over* short-term choice.²⁹ One may ask then, why I am dedicating discussion to ideals that I have shown are unable to inform long-term choice.

Infeasible ideals merit serious consideration for two reasons. First, infeasible ideals are viable independently of their relationship with feasible ideals and moreover have worth not only in improving our understanding of abstract concepts but also, as we shall see, as normative ideals for informing short-term choice. Should other claims about the superiority of long-term choice over short-term choice cease to hold, it is

²⁷ Adam Swift distinguishes between these approaches, categorising the former as 'practical' and the latter as 'epistemological'. See Adam Swift, 'The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances' *Social Theory and Practice* Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 363-387 (2008), p. 366.

²⁸ G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 270.

²⁹ See Chapter 1, Section IV.

important that we have a full understanding of the latter. Second, for some, such as David Miller, infeasible ideal theory constitutes a threat to feasible ideal theory and normative theories of justice in general. In this section I want to show that we need not choose between these two forms of ideal theorising, and that feasible ideal theory is not weakened by the existence of infeasible ideal theory. In considering infeasible ideals then, I help meet both the second and third Key Objectives of this thesis by establishing the conditions ideals have to meet in order to inform short-term choice, and by further buttressing long-term choice, respectively.

In this section I will first outline the conceptual coherence of infeasible ideal theorising. In doing this I will show that justice can be a non-normative concept. I will also demonstrate that justice is independent of feasibility conditions, and that it is therefore logical to discuss any of these categories without reference to the rest. The final conceptual point I will make is that infeasible justice does not undermine the concept of justice more broadly. I will then turn to consider the practical objection that infeasible ideal theory challenges feasible ideal theory, showing that this is not the case.

Infeasible ideal theory rests on the basic analytical assumption that an improved or unique understanding of a given concept can be attained by removing it from its particular context or conceptual system. In the case of justice it means making a distinction between justice in itself and justice as a practical, normative concept connected to possibility, probability, and stability. Free from these other categories one can understand what justice is, and what it demands, in a purer sense, independently of potentially complicating factors.

One of the claims this approach rests on is that there is no conceptually necessary link between ethical concepts and feasibility categories. Andrew Mason, for example, in responding to what may be termed the ‘realist’ political thought of scholars such as John Dunn, claims that it is not conceptually incoherent to discuss justice independently of questions of possibility, sufficient probability, and stability.³⁰

³⁰ Andrew Mason, ‘Just Constraints’ *British Journal of Political Science* Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 251-268 (2004), p. 253.

This point is disputed by Colin Farrelly who suggests that Mason's claim *is* conceptually incoherent to a degree. For Farrelly, 'a theory of social justice, and the principles of justice it endorses, must function as an adequate *guide* for our collective action.' When 'the collective aspiration to implement the conclusions of a theory would not result in any noticeable increase in the justness of one's society, then it fails as a *normative* theory.'³¹ The problem with Farrelly's claim is that it assumes that justice can only be a normative concept. Yet the *raison d'être* of infeasible ideal theorising is to think not how ideals of justice can inform our action but rather how they can improve our understanding. Crucially, infeasible ideal theorising is premised on producing conclusions that may not be practicable, or at least that it is ambivalent to the practicability of. As Laura Valentini notes, infeasible ideal theorists 'do not consider a capacity for guidance as a necessary condition for the validity of a conception of justice'.³²

Mason's claim then cannot be conceptually incoherent on the grounds that infeasible ideals fail as normative ideals, because infeasible ideals do not aspire to be normative in the first place. What then of other challenges to the conceptual coherence of his claim? It seems intuitively plausible to say that we can ask logically sound questions about justice without evoking possibility, sufficient probability, and stability. It is for instance sensible to ask 'What would be the most just social system?' without factoring in whether that system is possible or stable. Indeed it may be that the answer is a society where people are kinder and more altruistic, but that such a society would not be stable. Perhaps increased kindness and altruism is anathema to the protection of a state's borders, and soldiers from less warm-hearted countries would easily overcome their defences.

Those sceptical of the conceptual independence of justice may be persuaded by considering a question about one of the other categories in this particular conceptual group, for example, 'What would be the most stable social system?' In responding to this I believe most people would not intuitively factor in questions about the justness of the stable system, nor necessarily the possibility or probability of it being realised.

³¹ Colin Farrelly, 'Justice in Ideal Theory: A Refutation' *Political Studies* Vol. 55, pp. 844-864 (2007), p. 845.

³² Valentini, 'On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory', p. 337.

Similarly if they were asked, ‘Given present conditions, what social system is most *probable*?’ then they would similarly have no qualms in answering this question without reference to other categories; and would likely respond with a social system that is similar, if not identical, to contemporary society and therefore one that is far from meeting their standards of justice.³³ In short, it seems there are strong reasons to accept Mason’s claim that the various categories we are concerned with in this chapter are logically independent from each other. From this we can accept that we may have ideals of justice that are, to a greater or lesser extent, infeasible.

A potentially more significant challenge to infeasible ideals of justice is that such ideals risk making the whole concept of justice meaningless. Justice is in some ways a concept defined by limitations; it is not simply about how to determine the rules that govern the parameters of acceptable legislation, but rather how to do this in conditions of ‘moderate scarcity’ and ‘limited altruism’. Justice is premised on the assumption that societies lack the material abundance to allow everyone to have whatever they want without depriving others and that there are limits on people’s willingness to assist others and engage in cooperative schemes. Together these conditions comprise the ‘circumstances of justice’.³⁴

Pursuing justice thus means acknowledging the existence of a problem, and acknowledging that its answer will not lead to the supersession of that problem. Put slightly differently, justice is a necessarily *palliative* concept, rather than a curative concept. A society of material abundance and inexhaustible altruism is fundamentally not a just society nor an unjust society, it is rather a society that has superseded justice altogether.³⁵

The concern indicated above that stems from this understanding of justice is that without feasibility conditions to meet, ideals of justice will cease to be conceptions of

³³ The following chapter will also raise questions about the *stability* of contemporary, capitalist societies.

³⁴ This is a concept of David Hume’s adopted by Rawls. For a discussion of the ‘circumstances of justice’ see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Ch. 3, § 22.

³⁵ Somebody like Marx might argue that the solution to injustice is not to try to make society adhere to an ideal of justice but rather to move beyond the *need* for justice altogether. This solution would be evident in a communist society where the objective and subjective conditions are beyond the circumstances of justice. For a further discussion of communism as a solution to *both* injustice and justice see Allen E. Buchanan, *Marx and Justice: The Radical Critique of Liberalism* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 50-52.

justice at all, being instead conceptions of the most desirable or most morally right society. However this conclusion would be too hasty. Infeasible ideals of justice can, and must, still be constrained by the inherent limitations of justice indicated above. To illustrate, there are many ideals that fall within the circumstances of justice, that is that assume moderate scarcity and limited altruism, but that are impossible, insufficiently probable, or unstable. Indeed if the fears of the sceptics of the Entitlement Ideal discussed above are well-founded then a society governed by it would be within the circumstances of justice but unstable (as well as perhaps also being insufficiently probable). Conversely we may find in the future that there are societies that are outside the circumstances of justice but that are possible, sufficiently probable, and stable. In sum, accepting that justice is logically independent of possibility, probability, and stability need not lead to its conflation with other concepts such as desirability and moral rightness. Infeasible ideals can still fall within the circumstances of justice.

In sum, infeasible ideals of justice are not necessarily conceptually incoherent. We have good reasons to think that it is perfectly logical to discuss justice independently of other categories, including those connected to feasibility. Moreover we need not think that doing so undermines the concept of justice, as there are numerous ideals that will be both within the circumstances of justice while also being infeasible: an ideal being infeasible does not automatically entail that it is irrelevant to, or unconcerned with, justice.

A more serious challenge to infeasible ideals may accept that such ideals are not necessarily conceptually incoherent nor illogical but that they still possess other shortcomings including some that pose a range of possible threats to feasible ideal theorising. It is to these lines of criticism we now turn.

David Miller identifies what he terms a ‘neo-Augustinian’ tendency in infeasible ideal theories of justice; a reference to St. Augustine’s distinction between the limited, imperfect justice to be found on Earth and the true justice that can only be found in heaven. In formulating ideals of justice that can never be realised, contemporary, secular, infeasible ideal theories of justice take the same approach. For Miller this leads to ‘philosoph[ies] of lamentation’ where one focuses on the perfect ideal that is always beyond one’s grasp at the expense of theorising meaningful, but imperfect, change that

can actually be achieved.³⁶ As such the entire project of political theory as a normative pursuit is undermined. For Miller, political theory ought to be concerned with determining principles that are able to guide political action and infeasible ideal theory is problematic for failing to do so.

We have already seen that infeasible ideals do not aspire to guide action. However is it the case that such theories of justice undermine the feasible theories of justice that do? I believe this concern can be challenged in two ways. First, the effects of the criticism are lessened by the fact that we do not have to choose between feasible ideal theorising and infeasible ideal theorising.³⁷ There is no reason that we, either as individual political theorists or as the aggregate field as a whole, cannot do both, without either field suffering a problematic labour shortage. This criticism would only have traction if there were a chronic political theorist deficit. In these circumstances, questions about which fields of study were most deserving of our time may become pertinent. On the face of it though this political theorist deficit does not hold at present, and is thus not a concern.

Second, and related to the previous point, this criticism may rest on the uncharitable assumption that political theorists are unable to hold two different types of ideal at the same time.³⁸ If political theorists could only hold either feasible or infeasible ideals then we may worry that those in the latter camp would be trapped in their philosophy of lamentation, unable to contribute to practical normative discussions about nonideal choices. However as this is not the case we need not worry about this concern, and can assume that people who concern themselves, at least in part, with infeasible justice, can still also have a separate ideal of feasible justice that they can rely on for making long-term just choices.³⁹ The only philosophers who risk losing themselves in

³⁶ Miller, p. 230. For Augustine's original discussion of justice and the 'two cities' see Augustine of Hippo, 'City of God' in *Readings in Political Thought: Essential Texts Since Plato*, ed. by Mitchell Cohen and Nicole Fermon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 143.

³⁷ One version of what might be termed the 'time management' criticism is suggested by Carole Pateman and Charles W. Mills. See *Contract and Domination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 118.

³⁸ A related concern pertaining to conceptions of rights is raised by Katherine Eddy in 'Against Ideal Rights' *Social Theory and Practice* Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 463-481 (2008). For a discussion of this see Chapter 5, Section 2.

³⁹ Andrew Mason for example, as well as defending the importance of infeasible ideal theory, also argues for the need for more thorough, concrete, nonideal theorising. See Andrew Mason, 'Rawlsian theory and the Circumstances of Politics' *Political Theory* Vol. 38, No. 5, pp. 658-683 (2010), pp. 676-677.

lamentation are those who are peculiarly unable to retain conceptions of the same concept at different levels of abstraction; a type of philosopher who ought to be quite rare given the fundamental methodological demands of the discipline.⁴⁰

Miller's practicality criticisms could thus only apply if: infeasible ideal theorising *aimed* to provide ideals that informed long-term just choice, if emphasis on infeasible ideal theory led to a problematic fall in numbers working in feasible ideal theory, or if philosophers were only able to work on either feasible ideal theory or infeasible ideal theory. We can accept the importance of theorising independently of certain conditions while still accepting that practical ideals of justice ought to be constrained by these conditions.⁴¹

IV. Infeasible Ideals and Just Choice

As these conditions do not hold it is thus safe to say that infeasible ideal theorising does not pose any necessary threat to feasible ideal theorising. However, as I mentioned above, I would like to go further than this and suggest that infeasible ideals may actually be of benefit to those wishing to make just choices. Thus far this chapter has assumed that the purpose of these ideals is to allow one to better understand particular concepts in themselves. The section though will consider whether infeasible ideals may also have practical benefits. I want to show that ideals of this type can be both 'attitude guiding', that is, they can help us better understand a given concept, but also, to some extent, 'action-guiding', that is, they can perform a normative function in informing just choice.⁴²

⁴⁰ This line of argument is well summarised by Mason in his response to John Dunn (and critics of infeasible ideal theory more generally) in the following remarks: 'Of course, those who deny that political theory *must be* directly relevant to politics are not thereby committed to denying that political theory can contribute to the important and valuable task of identifying and evaluating feasible alternatives. The point is merely that its remit is broader than this.' Mason, 'Just Constraints', p. 253 (my emphasis).

⁴¹ A similar point is made by David Wiens. See David Wiens, "'Going Evaluative" to Save Justice from Feasibility – A Pyrrhic Victory' *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 64, No. 255, pp. 301-307, pp. 306-307.

⁴² See Brennan, pp. 317-318.

In what follows I use the example of communism to show how infeasible ideals can still be able to inform short-term just choice. Moreover I will also demonstrate how infeasible ideals can be practically useful even when they cannot support legislative or institutional changes. I conclude this section with some considerations on the more fundamental connections between infeasible ideals and feasible ideals.

It might be that even though an ideal of justice posited by a given theory is infeasible, that ideal not only tells us something about a shortcoming of the society we live in but that in doing this it may allow us to make some improvements to existing conditions. A good illustration of this is given by Zofia Stemplowska's example of Marxist theories of alienation and communism. Let us take 'alienation' to refer to an effect that capitalist relations of production have on participants in such relationships, particularly workers, whereby they are prevented from flourishing as individuals or as communities. This is due in part to the lack of autonomy caused by the limited control workers have over the process and product of production.⁴³ As, through significant increases in workplace democracy, work in a communist society would be significantly more autonomous, communism could be viewed as a solution to the problem of alienation.⁴⁴

Let us now assume that Marx was (a) completely correct about the existence and moral wrongness of alienation in capitalist societies and (b) completely wrong in believing communism to be feasible.⁴⁵ Even if these conditions hold we might find that communism would still be useful as a way of helping diagnose some of the problems of capitalist society as well as guiding attempts to reform it, even if communism itself

⁴³ This is an intentional simplification of what is a complex and multifaceted concept but this is sufficient for a discussion that is primarily about feasible ideals and infeasible ideals, rather than alienation. For Marx's original, and most comprehensive, discussion of alienation see Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' *Karl Marx: Early Texts* ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1844/1971), pp. 133-145, esp. pp. 139-141. For commentaries on alienation see, e.g. Sean Sayers, *Marx & Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

⁴⁴ See Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', pp. 147-148.

⁴⁵ We touched on the feasibility concerns some may have about communism above. As well as Cohen's worry about the feasibility of an economy premised on generosity (see footnote 11 above), there is the claim that planned economies lead to totalitarian government, see F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge Classics, 1944/2001) and Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962/1982), Ch. 1.

could never be realised.⁴⁶ Perhaps communism as an ideal could inform legislation that would allow for greater employee influence on decision making or to provide better and more comprehensive schooling to ensure individuals had the broadest possible range of career paths. Even if communism could never be realised, society could perhaps be improved by trying to make its institutions more similar to communist ones. In sum, communism then may be useful as a palliative, short-term choice informing ideal even if it turns out to be useless as a curative, long-term choice informing ideal.⁴⁷ This position challenges Luca Jacobi Uberti's claim that 'an ultimately unrealisable goal [cannot] (or at least should not) serve as a driver of justice-oriented reform.'⁴⁸ Rather, such ideals may still be helpful in informing short-term reform even when they are unable to inform long-term choice.

It might also be the case that an unrealisable ideal continues to be beneficial even when it ceases to be able to inform institutional and legislative improvement. We can imagine a society where laws that decrease alienation are effectively impossible; where institutional structures are so robustly alienating that they cannot be improved. In this situation we may be able, in virtue of our possessing an understanding of communism, to orient our own actions to providing support to help mitigate the negative effects of alienation. Perhaps this knowledge makes us kinder or more understanding and supportive towards people, even if the level of alienation remains the same. Again, while we may accept that we cannot hope to realise communism in full, its model citizen may provide a standard for us to strive for in our interpersonal relations.

Communism then may still be of practical value as a just choice informing ideal not only when it cannot inform long-term choice but also when it is unable to help us reform legal and institutional structures. We can see then that the ideal of communism as a solution to alienation would only cease to be of practical value if Marx's theory

⁴⁶ Stemplowska, 'What's Ideal about Ideal Theory?', p. 334.

⁴⁷ Marx himself may have been doubtful that such a reduction was feasible, given his tendency to discuss alienation and non-alienation in categorical rather than incremental terms. This perspective is evident in his remarks that improving wages within the capitalist system would only be 'better payment for the slave, and would not win either for the worker or for his labour their human status and dignity.' See Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', p. 143.

⁴⁸ Luca Jacobi Uberti, 'Good and Bad Idealisations in Political Theory' *Theoria* Vol. 80, pp. 205-231 (2014), p. 210.

of human nature was sufficiently mistaken, for example if it were to turn out that what human beings actually find most enjoyable, life-affirming, morally-rewarding and so on is engaging in alienating labour, where they have no control over their work and where they are in intense competition with their fellow citizens. Providing this is not the case and that the assumptions we fixed at the start for the purpose of this discussion are true, namely that alienation is undesirable and communism cannot be achieved, then communism will be, at least to some extent, a practically useful ideal. It would be useful then not in the sense of setting an ideal to realise in full but rather as a way of aligning attitudes, reforming institutions, and generally contributing to smaller scale improvements, perhaps even exclusively at the individual level.

This example thus helps us to respond more fully to Miller's criticism of infeasible ideals. He notes that their capacity to improve our knowledge of the world around us is inherently useful and that 'we have an interest in not being deceived about the character of the societies we are living in.' However he is concerned that the value of such an ideal conception of justice is diminished 'once we no longer expect such truth to guide practice to any significant extent.'⁴⁹

Our earlier response to Miller already takes some of the sting out of his criticism: we have seen that there is no reason to expect an infeasible ideal to operate alone and that one can use such an ideal to improve understanding while also employing a feasible ideal on which to inform long-term choice. However we can now add to this the fact that all but the most bizarre ideals are likely to be able to inform short-term choice and help us plan immediate improvements to current injustices.

By the same token we have a response to Joseph Carens's claim that an ideal that can never be achieved 'loses a good deal of its attraction.'⁵⁰ This point may rest on a category mistake in assuming that an infeasible ideal need be desirable or 'attractive' in order to be of value to the pursuit of justice. Rather, for an ideal to inform short-term choice it need only be able to demonstrate a contrast with a shortcoming in society at present, and promote thought and action directed at improving this. In summary

⁴⁹ Miller, *Justice for Earthlings*, p. 233.

⁵⁰ Joseph H. Carens, 'Compensatory Justice and Social Institutions' *Economics and Philosophy* Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 39-67 (1985), p. 64.

then, for ideals to inform short-term choice they need not satisfy feasibility conditions.⁵¹

Before proceeding to the final section it is worth stressing that there is also a more fundamental discussion to be had about the role of infeasible ideal theory in relation to feasible ideal theory. One may want to claim that in order to possess feasible ideals we also need to possess infeasible ideals, or if not this then at least the slightly weaker claim that we would be able to deduce the latter from the former. The argument may be that knowing what justice demands under feasible conditions means we ought to be able to know what it might demand if those conditions did not hold.⁵²

This is a deep and complex argument but it is not wholly pertinent to the discussion at hand. As we are primarily interested in defending the validity of ideal theory approaches to just choice the question of whether or not these necessarily rely in turn on holding fully abstract conceptions of justice is not one that necessarily needs to be answered here. It would likely pose a problem if I wanted to claim that a significant incompatibility marked the relationship between feasible ideals and infeasible ideals, or if I wanted to make any other major criticisms of infeasible ideal theory. As I wish to do neither this is not the case. Indeed I am inclined to think that not only are there both the inherent and practical values in infeasible ideals that I have discussed, but that possessing a feasible ideal of justice likely does mean that one either does possess or could logically derive an infeasible ideal from this.⁵³

Two final points ought to be considered in order to justify my decision to set aside any discussion dedicated exclusively to infeasible ideals for the remainder of this thesis. First, feasible ideals are significantly different from infeasible ideals, as qualifying for the former category likely requires meeting extensive conditions determined by

⁵¹ This similarly responds to Allen Buchanan's claim that it is characteristic of 'good theory' that there is a 'practicable route from where we are now to at least a reasonable approximation of the state of affairs that satisfies its principle'. Instead I believe this chapter demonstrates the various ways that ideals can be practically valuable even when they cannot be realised. See Allen E. Buchanan, *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self Determination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 61.

⁵² There is a parallel here with the structure of the 'weak necessity argument'. See Ch. 2, § II.

⁵³ This position is related to Cohen's claims about the role of fact-insensitive principles in grounding fact-sensitive principles. See *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, Ch. 6. For a critical discussion of this argument see Andrew Mason, 'What is the Point of Justice?' *Utilitas* Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 525-547 (2012) and Justin P. Holt, 'The Limits of an Egalitarian Ethos: G.A. Cohen's Critique of Rawlsian Liberalism' *Science and Society* Vol. 75, No. 2, pp. 236-261 (2011), esp. pp. 255-257.

various real world factors. As a result we need not assume that the former and the latter will bear a great deal in common and that a discussion of the former should necessarily entail discussion of the latter. By the same token the process of formulating these different types of ideals will itself be very different, with feasible ideals requiring reference to a far more extensive range of explanatory social theories. Second, due to the complexity of the above-mentioned conditions, much more can be said about what these conditions are and therefore the project of defining feasible ideals is not a simple one that can also comfortably accommodate a very different discussion about a different and more abstract set of methods and processes. In short, irrespective of their logical and conceptual connections, feasible ideals and infeasible ideals display significant differences that place further discussion of both beyond the capacity of this thesis.

V. Long-Term Just Choice and the Uncertainty Gambit

Let us recap the discussion thus far. In Section II I claimed that for ideals to inform long-term choice they generally have to be feasible, which entails meeting conditions of possibility, sufficient probability, and stability. Section III then showed how infeasible ideals are not inherently problematic, nor do they necessarily undermine feasible ideals or long-term choice. Section IV then went further in showing that infeasible ideals could also be practically valuable in informing short-term choice.

Having now discussed infeasible ideals we can return to the challenge noted at the end of Section II. Recall that I mentioned there that the claim that only feasible ideals ought to inform long-term choice can be challenged from the perspective of infeasible ideal theory. In particular I want to consider, but ultimately reject, the claim that in conditions of uncertainty about how to understand feasibility categories it is better to work without them. This challenge rests on the claim that if we cannot say with certainty which ideals are probable or stable we ought to set these categories aside and instead theorise the ideals that are to inform long-term choice with far less concern, if not no concern, for these conditions. While our ideals perhaps ought to take into account logical consistency and the laws of the universe, we ought not to consider any

limitations stemming from concerns about probability or stability. In short, without certainty about how to define and measure feasibility categories we cannot be certain which ideals are feasible and which ideals are infeasible. As noted at the start of this chapter we can term this challenge, ‘the uncertainty gambit’. I am particularly interested in how certain fundamental aspects of Marxist theory might be mobilised in support of this gambit, but before turning to this I would like to expand on the general character of this argument.

One response to this position may stress that it places unachievable epistemic burdens on ideals. As nothing can be known for certain, certainty is not a standard we should strive for. Instead it is sufficient to aim for something weaker, some kind of informed plausibility, which we can use to determine when we can reasonably assume that we are right to think that a given ideal would or would not meet possibility, sufficient probability, or stability conditions. This position thus acknowledges uncertainty but seeks a practical response that strives to still arrive at judgements about feasibility, albeit imperfect ones.

Sceptics though might respond that even this less ambitious standard may be too speculative. They might note how popular perceptions of what is probable and stable can shift massively over time or point to the occurrence of political and social changes that can often seem to happen without any warning.⁵⁴ In a world where our notions about the limits of probability and stability can be so easily challenged it is a significant risk to place our faith in imperfect and fixed conceptions of these categories.

Doing this may mean that we strive for something far less desirable than what we may have achieved, or worse, that in setting our sights too low we fail to realise what we could have achieved had we worked towards a goal that we might have believed failed to meet feasibility conditions. Even if this does not happen it may be that pursuing a less desirable ideal causes issues of path dependence when we realise that a more desirable ideal is in fact achievable; that is, it may be difficult to ‘change track’ to focus on realising the more desirable ideal. This concern is of course compounded by

⁵⁴ In recent years the revolutions of the Arab Spring as well as the success of Donald Trump’s Republican Primary campaign and the UK’s vote to leave the European Union, are all examples of events that were unexpected by many. More generally, political revolutions provide particularly stark examples of challenges to received wisdom about what is feasible.

the fact that we are dealing with ideals that may be being worked towards over many years. This point is well made by Mason who claims that ‘fallibility and the limits on what we can reliably predict’ mean that we ought not to limit our theorising to what we understand to be feasible. Instead ‘[w]e need to explore ideals in a way that is not too tightly constrained by what we judge to be possible, in order to prevent thinking from being rendered irrelevant by changes we did not, or could not, foresee.’⁵⁵

There are various arguments we can derive from Marxist theory that appear to support the uncertainty gambit. This is largely due to a number of fundamental aspects of Marxist theory that relate to the concept of ‘denaturalisation’. By denaturalisation I mean the process of showing how facts that are generally perceived to be necessary or fixed are actually historically contingent. This takes several forms that I will consider in this section, namely: the essentially historical character of human nature; the significant potential of technological and productive development; and the increased risk of misunderstandings about the proper limits of feasibility conditions due to ideological pressures. For various reasons then, Marxists may want to argue that limits that are often treated as fixed are actually of a historical and contestable nature.

Human nature is often presented, both by philosophers and non-philosophers, as something that does not change.⁵⁶ For Marx though, human nature is the ‘ensemble of social relations’ and rather than remaining constant is largely a product of the characteristics of particular societal formations.⁵⁷ This is not to say that Marx has *no* formal notion of human nature and that there are no limits to the form that human nature takes. Indeed he conceives of human nature as centred round production, with individuals and societies striving to satisfy various material and non-material needs

⁵⁵ See Mason, ‘Just Constraints’, pp. 254-255.

⁵⁶ Examples of apparently more ‘fixed’ conceptions of human nature include the egoistic, rational conception of human beings offered by Thomas Hobbes, see *On the Citizen* ed. by Richard Tuck & Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1651/1998), p. 6. This can be contrasted with John Locke’s more positive conception of humans as possessing a natural notion of moral rights and duties, see John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* ed. by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1690/1960), Ch. 2, § 6. Adam Smith’s conception of humans as ‘predispos[ed] to truck, barter, and exchange’ also offers a conception of human nature that is perhaps especially at odds with that of Marx, see Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (London: Methuen & Co., 1776/1904), Bk. 1, Ch. 2.

⁵⁷ See Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1845/1969), 7th thesis.

and in doing this creating new needs.⁵⁸ However what those needs are and whether they can or cannot be satisfied by society are historical questions and as such the *content* of human nature shifts markedly in different societies.⁵⁹

The relevance of this conceptualisation of human nature is that it can act as a critical tool for understanding how capitalist social relations may encourage self-interest and undermine community.⁶⁰ For Marx this happens due to the character of social relations in capitalist societies where capitalists use workers instrumentally in order to gain profit, while workers use capitalists instrumentally to gain wages. At the same time workers compete with each other for limited jobs in a finite labour market and capitalists compete with each other for sales of goods and services in a finite commodity market.⁶¹ Rather than seeing these characteristics as something that all future societies will have to accommodate, one can argue that, as they are connected to a specific set of social relations, a change in social relations, for example towards communism, may lead to a change in these characteristics.⁶² According to Marx, humans in the cooperative productive systems of communism understand their essential character not only in individual terms but also in terms of their membership of the community and in part perhaps because of this are far more willing to make

⁵⁸ By 'non-material' needs I refer to a broad category encompassing goods such as the development of moral and artistic sensibilities, friendship, notions of community etc.

⁵⁹ For Marx's account of human need as it relates to human nature see Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The German Ideology' in *The German Ideology Part One, With Selections from Parts Two and Three, together with Marx's 'Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy* ed. by C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1845/1970), pp. 48-49. Norman Geras offers a succinct summary of the formal aspect of Marx's theory of human nature. Noting that, 'if diversity in the character of human beings is in large measure set down by Marx to historical variation in their social relations of production, the very fact that they entertain these sorts of relations, the fact that they produce and they have a history, he explains in turn by some of their general and constant, intrinsic, constitutional characteristics; in short by their human nature.' See Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso: 1983), pp. 67-68.

⁶⁰ Marx stresses this point, noting that 'economics rigidifies the alienated form of social intercourse, as the essential, original form that corresponds to man's nature.' See Marx, 'On James Mill' in *Karl Marx: Early Texts*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1844/1971), p. 194. C.B. Macpherson's 'possessive individualism thesis' also offers an account of how liberal theorists from the 17th century onwards have allegedly portrayed a conception of human nature that is specific to capitalism as one that is universal. See C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) and C.B. Macpherson, 'Market Concepts in Political Theory' *The Canadian Journal of Political Science* Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 490-497 (1961).

⁶¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1848/1969), pp. 18-19.

⁶² This point will be considered in more detail in the following chapter. See Chapter 4, Section III.

contributions to assist fellow citizens who may be unable to provide for themselves.⁶³ This shift from an ethos of competition to one of cooperation is, as we saw in Section II, embodied in the Communist Ideal.

If Marx's prediction about communist society is correct then it will be necessary to revise how sufficient probability and stability are conceptualised. If human nature can allow for societies that are as generally altruistic and honest as Marx's communism then it would be a mistake to treat such ideals as unable to inform long-term choice. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, even if Marx was wrong about the particular development of human nature projected in his ideal of communism, if he is right about its essentially historical and malleable character then sufficient probability and stability will still need to be revised. If human nature is an essentially historical phenomenon then we risk losing out on desirable ideals by only permitting those ideals that adhere to contemporary conceptions of human nature to meet sufficient probability and stability conditions and thus inform long-term choice.

If we are uncertain about the possible range of subjective characteristics in future societies, i.e. what people will essentially be like, then we might also stress our uncertainty about the objective conditions of future societies, i.e. the range of productive and technological capacities. Future technological developments may make it far easier to satisfy human material needs. Meeting consumer demand may also become far less labour intensive and may free up significant time to be spent outside of labour oriented towards the production of physiologically necessary goods and engaging instead in more expressive work or in leisure activities.⁶⁴

Once again, if we are unable to properly forecast technological developments then it may be a mistake to assume that we can say with any confidence what the limits of sufficient probability and stability are. Indeed one might push this criticism even further. If these claims about human nature in communism and material abundance are legitimate then it brings into question the relevance of the circumstances of justice

⁶³ See Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, p. 11.

⁶⁴ See Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. III*, ed. (posthumously) by Friedrich Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1894/1959), Ch. 48, § 3; We can also assume that these innovations may be combined with the harnessing of entirely clean energy that would thus avoid the dangerous ecological costs of material production.

presented above. If we are unable to know the limits of subjective and objective conditions then should we be focusing our normative efforts on ideals of justice as opposed to ideals of desirable societies more generally?

In the face of these challenges I would like to defend feasible ideals, that is, ideals that employ reasonably strict conceptualisations of possibility, sufficient probability, and stability. In doing this I am not criticising the Marxist theory itself. Indeed the following chapter will consider how aspects of this theoretical approach can be used to make the ideals that are to inform long-term choice a more, rather than less, exclusive category. They can do this by helping place stringent demands on the conditions ideals have to meet in order to perform this function. Rather then, I want to show why this interpretation of this theory is mistaken.

There are various counters that can be made to the above claims regarding the historical character of human nature. An obvious reply is to deny that human nature is historical. However I do not want to take this position. Although this thesis can be agnostic about whether human nature is ‘fixed’ or not, historical conceptions of human nature of the type favoured by Marx seem intuitively more plausible and allow us to make better sense of the broad range of different moral, legal, and cultural practices throughout human history.

A sharper response, which does not challenge the historical conception of human nature in itself, is to suggest that the historical conception may almost prove too much here. If human nature is a product of historical factors then it may be difficult to plan any kind of long term political change as we may be unable to predict how human nature will be shaped by interim social and political structures. It may be that the changes necessary *en route* to realising a particular ideal lead to changes in human nature that cannot be accounted for at the ideal theorising stage but that make full realisation of the ideal difficult. For instance, even if Marx was correct about the character of human nature in communism, it may be that he was wrong about human nature in socialism and that the latter form of human nature becomes an obstacle to realising communism. Concerns of this sort challenge ambitious, ideal projects that span several forms of human nature, suggesting that the unpredictability of these

calculations make it prudent to adopt a more conservative approach that works with human beings largely as they are at present.

This position is further supported by the risk of path dependency that comes with the above approach, as it may be that pursuing more speculative and distant long-term ideals causes more realisable long-term ideals to fail. For example, while socialism may be achievable, communism may prove not to be, and it may be that treating the former simply as a stepping stone to the latter promotes political practice that makes the former less likely.⁶⁵ More problematically it may be that we miss altogether, or see but dismiss, an achievable shorter term ideal on the basis of a speculative long-term ideal.

The same logic can be used to respond to uncertainty about technological development. We ought not to work towards a society that will be made feasible on the basis of advanced technologies we cannot know will exist. Should it be the case that such technologies are not possible or not practical then political resources will have been wasted and the chance to achieve more immediate gains will have been at best postponed and at worst lost. Underpinning these claims about path dependency is a form of cautious conservatism that suggests that it may be better, all other things being equal, to risk losing out on gains due to employing an overly stringent modelling of feasibility conditions than an overly permissive one. This is due to the problems of path dependency rising in correlation with increases in the distance between reality and realising a given ideal. Put simply, there will be fewer opportunities to miss if one commits to a more gradual ideal theory, premised on more demonstrably feasible ideals.

All in all then I believe that uncertainty about future subjective and objective conditions lends itself to making decisions that are more, rather than less, 'feasible'. It is more prudent to work towards what is best for people as they exist at present rather than what is the best society imaginable, given that understandings of what is best are likely to change in unpredictable ways. A similar point is made by Andrew Collier

⁶⁵ Persistent examples of this problem can be found in debates about means and ends in socialism. As Steven Lukes notes in his discussion of these debates, 'the question of means and ends has pervaded the entire history of Marxism, and more generally socialism, in [the twentieth] century.' See Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 102.

who doubts that we can presume to know the questions that will be prompted and need to be answered in future societies. He claims that Marx's problem was not, as it is often said, that the latter said too little about societies after capitalism but that he said too much. Marx's discussion of a radically different, far more generous, human nature in communism makes it a more speculative and less practical ideal to premise long-term choice on. For Collier, one of the greatest strengths of Marx's socialism is that it does not make excessive demands of human nature. Rather he thinks that socialism, for Marx, is, or at least ultimately will be, sufficiently appealing to people in the world at present, responding as it does to problems generated by contradictions inherent within capitalism.⁶⁶ For the same reasons I believe it is an appropriate ideal with which to inform long-term choice. Indeed the synergy between socialism and present day society makes it optimally positioned as an ideal for contemporary political action to adopt.⁶⁷

To bring this back to the more general point about justice: we do not want to risk losing the opportunity to create a more just society in order to create a society that is beyond justice. In Marxist terms, socialism is a response to the problems of capitalist society, that, in terms of justice, refers to the ability of socialism to more justly and rationally organise the production and distribution of goods within society. Communism on the other hand is a response to the problems of socialism. However it is hard to be sure what these problems will be as we move further and further away from present day society. As such, gambling on having a sufficient understanding of these problems may be imprudent.⁶⁸

Accepting that ideals at present ought to work within, rather than beyond, the constraints of the circumstances of justice in order to inform long-term choice need not entail any permanent position. It may be that in the future ideals that move beyond justice, including Marx's Communist Ideal, meet feasibility conditions and can inform

⁶⁶ Andrew Collier, *Socialist Reasoning: An Inquiry into the Political Philosophy of Scientific Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), p. 16.

⁶⁷ This point will be discussed further in the following chapter. See Chapter 4, Section III.

⁶⁸ Rawls does well to capture the difficulty of predicting the problems of future societies and future agents. In discussing the post-justice world of Marxian communism he notes that its inhabitants are 'strange to us', and it being 'hard to describe them.' John, Rawls, 'Marx III - His Ideal: A Society of Freely Associated Producers' in *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. by Samuel Freeman (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 371.

‘most desirable society realising’ choice.⁶⁹ At present however such ideals are too speculative and high-risk. Similarly, we should not mistake epistemic limitations, which entail that lack of knowledge causes some ideals to fail to meet feasibility conditions for ontic limitations, which entail that the ideals fail to meet feasibility conditions due to their inherent impossibility, improbability, or instability. While some ideals will be inherently infeasible, either at present or permanently, others are infeasible because we lack the knowledge or the means to assess their feasibility, either at present or permanently.

The two arguments we have looked at thus far have stressed the changing natures of human beings and productive technology, arguing, I have suggested wrongly, that we should doubt the validity of more conservative conceptions of the limits of probability and stability. Another factor that Marxists may claim ought to prompt us to question how feasibility conditions are conceptualised is the risk that these are affected by ideological factors. By ideologies I mean beliefs that are (a) false and (b) necessary for the maintenance of certain systems of social relations.⁷⁰ What is thought to be true, either universally or otherwise, may be a falsehood that fulfils a functional role in contemporary society but would cease to be required in other societies. Assuming ‘ideology’ is a viable concept we might think that ideals will be especially prone to negative influence from such ideologies. Ideologies, either through conscious or subconscious processes, serve to protect given social systems as they are, while, at least some, ideals aim to change systems. As such it would be reasonable to assume that the systemic self-defence mechanisms of contemporary society would place unduly stringent limits on what qualifies as possible, sufficiently probable, and stable. If this was so then what we understand to be reliable conceptualisations of these categories may not be reliable and may instead be placing needless constraints on our ideals of justice.

In response I would point to the critical character of Marxist ideology critique. The benefit of this theory is not just in observing that such ideological beliefs exist but in

⁶⁹ My position here is in sharp contrast to Lukes who presents a far more pessimistic account of the future of ideals. He notes that it will likely be impossible to escape ‘the circumstances of justice’ as ‘scarcity, limited altruism, conflicting moralities, and limits upon knowledge and understanding [are] here to stay’. See Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, p. 94.

⁷⁰ See Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, pp. 64-65.

identifying what they are and in explaining how they are ideological and what a non-ideological conception of the same concept or phenomenon would look like. In short, ideologies exist but so do analytical tools that can greatly assist one in discerning between, and making sense of, true and false assertions and theories.⁷¹ Ideology-critique then is actually a valuable tool in helping to establish appropriate standards of possibility, probability, and stability. Rather than assuming that the existence of ideologies should lead us to ignore these categories altogether, or at least to a significant extent, we should use ideology critique to better understand these categories in order to ensure that we avoid placing needless constraints on our long-term ideals, while also avoiding investing strategic resources in achieving ideals that are likely unachievable.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked to develop a more concrete understanding of ideals of justice. I have done this by examining the distinction between feasible and infeasible ideals. I began by considering the three feasibility conditions that ideals have to meet if they are to inform long-term choice, namely possibility, sufficient probability, and stability. I then showed that while infeasible ideals are unable to inform long-term choice, there is no reason they cannot inform short-term choice. In defending these two positions I met the second Key Objective of this thesis, that being to identify the different conditions ideals have to satisfy in order to inform each type of just choice.

I also sought to defend a conceptualisation of infeasible ideal theory and feasible ideal theory that sees the relationship between them as at worst benign and at best beneficial. I looked to show that as well as being valuable in of itself, the former poses no challenge to the latter. In doing this I helped buttress feasible ideal theory, and by extension long-term just choice, by demonstrating that it is unthreatened by developments in infeasible ideal theory.

⁷¹ Marx's theory of ideology has been systematically developed through the critical realist method of 'explanatory critique', see Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, pp. 62-63, and Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 87.

In this sense this chapter anticipates meeting the third Key Objective in Chapter 4. Further ground work for this was provided in Section V where I responded to various challenges to the claim that long-term choice can only be informed by feasible ideals. Notable among these challenges were those derived from Marxist theory. While these appeared to be superficially plausible I looked to show that they pulled long-term choice in the wrong direction. Ideals ought to work, at least for the foreseeable future, within the circumstances of justice and with a strong conception of feasibility. To ignore these conditions risks wasting scarce political resources on ideals that we cannot know are achievable.

The following chapter will build on this, showing how an alternative interpretation of Marxist theory provides a rich and compelling basis on which to model feasibility. In doing this it can help us identify conditions within which it is defensible to pursue long-term choice over short-term choice. As we shall see, Marxist theory allows us to do this as it provides both a stringent and exclusive account of feasibility that admits few ideals, along with sound reasons to doubt the efficacy of attempts to reform capitalism via short-term choice.

4. Defensible Long-Term Choice

In the previous chapter I argued that any ideal that is to inform long-term just choice has to meet feasibility conditions. I defended the intuitive claim that as long-term choice aims towards the full realisation of given ideals of justice, then any ideal that cannot *possibly* be achieved is clearly unable to perform this function. Similarly, ideals that are possible but *insufficiently probable* represent a poor investment of limited political resources. As, finally, are any ideals that are *unstable*, i.e. that we cannot expect to endure over time.

In making this claim about the conditions ideals have to meet in order to inform long-term choice, as well as a further claim about the conditions ideals have to meet in order to inform short-term choice, Chapter 3 built on the abstract conception of ideals employed in Chapter 2. However, as making these claims rested in part on contrasting feasible ideal theory and infeasible ideal theory, more concrete facets of the character of ideals were, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, still omitted. Doing this allowed me to bring out the tensions found when comparing and contrasting feasible ideals and infeasible ideals, and then to defend feasible ideal theory in the face of the uncertainty gambit. More fundamentally it also allowed me to meet the second Key Objective of the thesis in outlining the conditions that ideals have to satisfy in order to inform either form of just choice.

Having defended this more general point I can now engage directly with the third Key Objective of this thesis. Recall that this seeks to show that it can be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice. We saw in Chapter 1 that long-term choice is intuitively appealing, with its promise of greater gains, full justice, and the possibility of more radical forms of political change. However we also saw that this is offered at the cost of relatively greater risks than we would expect to accompany short-term choices.¹ My aim in this chapter is to show that with the correct conception of feasibility we can retain the high gains of long-term choice, while lowering the risks

¹ See Chapter 1; esp. Section I.

associated with it, and as such make it to defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice.

My concern with questions of feasibility mirrors John Rawls's framing of political theory as a 'realistically utopian' enterprise.² Realistically utopian ideals are those that can be achieved in 'favourable but still possible' conditions and are 'allowed by the laws and tendencies of the social world.'³ However I will argue in this chapter that if we take feasibility seriously we may find that liberal egalitarian ideals such as Rawls's, as well as liberal ideals more generally,⁴ may fail to meet feasibility conditions. This claim rests on a Marxist conception of feasibility that suggests that capitalist economies tend towards inequality and are inherently unstable. Moreover, the structure of power in capitalist societies may make attempts to counter these tendencies through reforms prohibitively difficult.⁵ If this is the case then Rawls's own ideal of justice would be simply utopian rather than realistically utopian, as it would *not* be 'allowed by the laws and tendencies of the social world'.

The benefit of the Marxist approach is that it offers a notably stringent set of feasibility conditions that, if applied, would decrease the chance of long-term choices being informed by infeasible ideals that waste political resources. In this sense it would lower the relative risk involved in favouring long-term choice over short-term choice. Moreover, the Marxist conception of feasibility also undermines the defensibility of short-term choice by suggesting that attempts to increase the immediate justness of

² John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 6, and Samuel Freeman, *Rawls* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 480. Rawls sees his realistic utopianism as starting from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's claim that philosophy ought to take 'men as they are and laws as they might be.' See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (London: Penguin Books - Great Ideas Series, 1762/2004), p. 1, and Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 7.

³ John Rawls, 'Introduction: Remarks on Political Philosophy' in *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. by Samuel Freeman (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 10-11; see also, Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 4.

⁴ By 'liberal' ideals I specifically mean ideals that advocate capitalist economic systems, with 'liberal egalitarian' ideals being a subsection of these that additionally advocate principles of redistributive justice.

⁵ Alex Callinicos states that 'the great weakness of egalitarian liberalism' is its belief that its ideals of justice are realisable within 'a capitalist market economy.' He claims that in order to realise the ideals of liberal egalitarianism we have to move away from the system as it is today as 'egalitarian justice can be achieved only against capitalism.' See Alex Callinicos, *Equality* (Oxford: Polity, 2000), pp. 131-132.

society may be fettered by structural tendencies in capitalism that generally make successful progressive change less probable and, when it is achieved, less stable.

In arguing in favour of a particular conception of feasibility this chapter departs from the more formal level of abstraction that this thesis has adopted until this point. In previous chapters I have almost exclusively made claims that apply to all ideals. In this chapter however, I offer an account of feasibility that will actively exclude a wide range of ideals from consideration for long-term choice informing roles. The merits of the Marxist approach aside, it is necessary to make this departure from formalness in order to meet the third Key Objective, which as we saw in Chapter 1, is important for both theoretical and political reasons. My discussion here however, will not be exclusively at this more concrete level. In order to advance the Marxist argument it is necessary to expand on the general theory of feasibility introduced in the previous chapter, as this provides a conceptual framework in which to situate my Marxist conception of feasibility. The claims made in the first half of this chapter then ought to be as comprehensively applicable as those made in Chapters 2 and 3, and as my subsequent discussion in Chapter 5 will be.

I begin this chapter by expanding on the conceptualisation of feasibility presented in Chapter 3, introducing the notion of ‘obstacles’ that prospective long-term ideals must show they can either avoid or remove if they are to satisfy feasibility conditions (§ I). Having provided a general definition of obstacles to feasibility conditions I then proceed to consider how to conceptualise and assess obstacles in the three feasibility categories of possibility, sufficient probability, and stability (§ II). Following this I offer a Marxist approach to conceptualising feasibility. A particularly helpful contribution Marxism can make to feasibility assessments is in identifying those obstacles to feasibility that are *necessary* features of capitalist society and thus unable to overcome without replacing capitalism. This perspective establishes a range of significant obstacles that may cast doubt on the feasibility of many ideals of justice, notably those that advocate the combination of capitalist economies alongside more egalitarian distributions of wealth, and indeed those that simply advocate capitalism (§ III). The final section will respond to and refute a significant criticism of the Marxist approach. Namely that it conceptualises feasibility in such stringent terms that it either

excludes *all* ideals or, more fundamentally, rejects the need for ideals and ideal theory altogether. I will show firstly that socialist ideals can meet Marxist feasibility conditions and secondly that Marxist models of feasibility, when applied to real world circumstances, still require ideals and ideal theory (§ IV).

I. Feasibility Obstacles

One way of understanding how feasibility functions is to imagine that a given ideal has three paths ahead of it, marked ‘possible’, ‘sufficiently probable’, and ‘stable’. In order to qualify as feasible, ideals have to reach the end of each path. However, standing between ideals and their meeting each feasibility condition are a range of obstacles.⁶ This section will expand on what I mean by obstacles, but let us briefly consider a simple example in order to outline the general character of these concepts. We saw in the last chapter that for an ideal to be possible it cannot violate laws of nature, for example by advocating a society where people did not require sustenance in order to survive. It is probably safe to assume that any ideal aspiring to meet feasibility conditions would not advocate a sustenance-free society, however if such an ideal existed it would find its attempt to meet these conditions blocked by the human necessity for sustenance. Alternatively, all of those more reasonable ideals that did not have this impossible aspiration would proceed unimpeded by the obstacle.

We can think of the paths as each containing numerous obstacles, most of which a given ideal will be able to avoid. However, should an ideal be permanently blocked by even one obstacle on any of the paths then it will not satisfy feasibility conditions. In being infeasible it will then of course also, by extension, be unable to inform long-term just choice. Ideal theorists who wish to arrive at ideals for informing long-term choice thus have to do two things. First, they must ensure that they have a robust and sufficiently stringent conception of feasibility obstacles in order to prevent mischaracterisation of infeasible ideals as feasible ideals. Second, they must show that their own ideals are not impeded by obstacles and thus rendered infeasible.

⁶ The term ‘obstacles’ is used in a similar fashion by both Simmons and Mills. See Simmons, p. 16, and Mills, p. 181.

Obstacles to feasibility can be divided into two main categories. On the one hand there are those that we can expect to be permanent features of their respective paths, call these ‘fixed’. In contrast to these are the ‘contingent’ obstacles that are regarded as non-permanent features of given paths. While these obstacles prevent an ideal from being *immediately* feasible, it *may* be viable to subsequently remove them through nonideal enterprise.⁷ Whether or not an ideal can be considered infeasible in the face of a contingent obstacle, depends on the perceived likelihood that the obstacle will be removed in the future. While by definition it is *possible* to remove *all* contingent obstacles, only in the case of some will it be sufficiently probable that they will be removed.

To clarify this distinction, consider the difference between the above noted human need for sustenance and historical opposition to marriage equality. It would likely be a grave error to place our faith in the human need for sustenance ever disappearing. However it would seem an almost equally grave error to treat a matter of public opinion as no more malleable than the necessity of sustenance. Indeed, we have seen huge attitudinal shifts in views on marriage equality in recent years,⁸ which do well to illustrate how some obstacles can be removed, and are thus not prohibitive barriers to an ideal’s meeting feasibility conditions. While in the past, an ideal that required marriage equality might have seemed farfetched, in many societies today the same ideal would be broadly popular.

This difference is an important one because ideal theorists aiming to inform long-term choice will have to ensure that their ideals are not obstructed by fixed obstacles but will likely accept that their ideals will be obstructed by at least some contingent obstacles. Ideal theorists can have confidence that certain types of contingent obstacles, such as those pertaining to attitudes to marriage equality, can be removed.

⁷ Gilabert and Lawford-Smith draw a similar distinction, referring to ‘hard constraints’ and ‘soft constraints’. See Gilabert and Lawford Smith, p. 814.

⁸ This trend is evidenced in the increasing number of states that offer some form of legal same-sex marriage, in referenda results such as the Republic of Ireland’s 62% vote in favour of marriage equality in 2015, and in polling figures that often show a remarkable turnaround in public opinion on this issue. As an example of such polling data see the increase in support for marriage equality in the USA from 27% in 1996 to 61% in 2016. See *Gallup Inc.*, ‘Marriage’ (2016).

In what follows I will outline different types of obstacles and how these map onto the three feasibility conditions discussed above and in the previous chapter.

As we have seen, fixed obstacles can relate to laws of nature and prevent any ideals that may violate these from meeting feasibility conditions. As well as obstacles that safeguard laws of nature, there are parallel obstacles that perform the same function for laws of formal logic. The example from the previous chapter of an ideal that requires that laws have to both maximise utility and ensure equal provision of the greatest range of individual rights would evidently confront a fixed obstacle on the possibility path that states that for an ideal to be feasible it cannot require the aims of governance to be contradictory.⁹

Fixed obstacles thus relate invariably to the possibility condition. By virtue of the fact that they conceptualise obstacles that cannot be removed, we can infer that it will be impossible to achieve an ideal that runs counter to such an obstacle. For this reason, fixed obstacles are generally the simplest obstacles to theorise and to make assessments with.

Moving away from fixed obstacles, consider an ideal of justice that, in order to be realised, requires a society to implement a top band income tax rate of 85%.¹⁰ The implementation of this ideal, unlike say the sustenance-free ideal, is clearly *possible*. Not only does the high tax ideal not seem to violate any law of nature or logic, but we also know that various states have imposed even higher rates of income tax in the past.¹¹ There is thus no fixed obstacle standing between this ideal and satisfaction of feasibility conditions. However this ideal may still be classified as infeasible. The feasibility of the ideal rests on whether we expect that it is sufficiently likely that the conditional obstacle to this ideal will be overcome.

⁹ See Chapter 2, Section, III.

¹⁰ Note that the demand for this particular rate of taxation need not be an explicit requirement of the ideal. As we saw earlier, ideals of justice are generally pitched at a much more abstract level than this, see Chapter 2, Section V. However we can imagine that in order for a given ideal to be realised any concrete application of it would require a rate of taxation of approximately this level.

¹¹ For periods between the end of World War II and the start of the premierships of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA, both countries had top band income tax rates of over 90%.

To clarify this point let us consider two forms of conditional obstacle that may confront our high tax ideal. One class of objections to this ideal might argue that while high rates of income tax were common in the past, economic theory and political culture have progressed and as such it is now much less likely that an ideal that is reliant on high rates of tax could be implemented at present. Sceptics may point to the apparent media consensus in favour of low taxation as an example of how enshrined this attitude has become. An argument of this sort can be understood as a contingent obstacle on the probability path. Although we would not want to say that it is impossible that such an ideal could be achieved, we might feel that it is not sufficiently probable that it could be achieved. As has been stated elsewhere, an ideal that is not sufficiently probable would sensibly be considered a poor investment of political resources.¹²

Another form of conditional obstacle that might confront this ideal would relate to its *stability*.¹³ It may be a concern for instance that high earners would flee the country or avoid or evade paying taxes at the new rate of taxation. If this happened there may be shortfalls in government budgets that the state might not be able to recover from.¹⁴ If it is predicted that a government could not continue to implement this ideal-satisfying rate of tax over time then the ideal would not be stable and thus it would not meet feasibility conditions.¹⁵

These particular claims about the feasibility of high rates of income tax are not considered because they necessarily capture worrying truths about taxation, but due to the fact that they bring into relief more general features of feasibility obstacles. First, this example allows us to firmly establish the distinction between fixed and conditional obstacles. While it is always necessary to ensure that the ideals that inform long-term choice avoid fixed obstacles, the question of avoiding contingent obstacles is far more open. As Gilabert and Lawford-Smith observe, making this distinction helps us to avoid two pitfalls when theorising justice. If we only acknowledge fixed obstacles then

¹² See Chapter 3, Section V.

¹³ For definitions of both stability and probability see Chapter 3, Section II.

¹⁴ For a discussion of these phenomena see for example Sunil Gulati, 'Capital Flight: Causes, Consequences, and Cures' *Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 165-185 (1988).

¹⁵ Note that there is no reason why a given ideal could not be blocked by only one feasibility condition, e.g. while an ideal is probable it would not be stable in practice, or vice versa. Similarly it may be blocked by both of these feasibility conditions, i.e. even if the ideal was not insufficiently probable it would still be unstable in practice.

we risk a ‘hopeless idealism’ where we treat any possible ideal as feasible.¹⁶ Without a sense that contingent obstacles can constitute serious obstacles to an ideal being sufficiently probable or stable then we risk pursuing strategies that, more often than not, will lead to the political resource wastage cautioned against above. Alternatively, if we treat contingent obstacles as being no different to fixed obstacles then we fall into the trap of ‘cynical realism’, where no meaningful change ought to be pursued as no obstacle to realising a given ideal can be removed.¹⁷

Second, the example allows us to think about how we approach contingent obstacles. Following on from the previous point, we may have good reasons to imagine that the challenges involved in removing some contingent obstacles are too great to merit confronting them and that as such it is better to simply avoid these altogether. However it may be that we have confidence that an obstacle can indeed be removed with the proper nonideal efforts and as such it is better to retain our ideal on the assumption that this can be done. In terms of the above example of the high rate of income tax, this is the difference between abandoning this ideal in favour of one that will not be obstructed by these obstacles, and retaining this ideal on the expectation that these obstacles can be overcome. For instance, we may believe that both the sufficient probability obstacle and the stability obstacle to higher tax rates hold at present but that with the appropriate political work they could be removed. One might think that objective factors such as rising inequality along with strong counter-narratives extolling the virtues of more egalitarian distributions can help us change attitudes and thus remove these obstacles in order for the redistributive ideal to become sufficiently probable and stable.

Third, the example allows us to make a further distinction between sufficient probability obstacles and stability obstacles, and see how these may each block ideals in different ways. Aside from the distinct character of the obstacles that confront ideals in each category, there will also be very different nonideal perspectives on whether to attempt to remove these and how we would best do so. A course of action that is an excellent nonideal solution to a sufficient probability obstacle may be a poor response

¹⁶ Gilabert and Lawford-Smith, p. 815.

¹⁷ Ibid.

to a stability obstacle and vice versa. A perspective that focuses simply on contingent obstacles in general will not be able to account for these distinctions.

The concept of ‘obstacles’ is a useful way of understanding ideals and whether or not they satisfy feasibility conditions. As it stands though this model is still incomplete. Note that thus far no explicit mention has been made of either the agents who are expected to implement given ideals, or the particular nonideal conditions within which they will do this. For this reason two important additional questions, raised by Gilabert and Lawford-Smith, ought to be asked when making feasibility assessments: ‘Feasible for whom?’ and ‘Feasible when and where?’¹⁸

The first question acknowledges the important fact that in order for an ideal to be feasible it has to be able to be put into practice, and that it will often be the case that only specific actors and institutions are able to do this. If an ideal relies on certain actors and institutions implementing it for it to be realised then it may meet obstacles that it would not were that ideal to rely instead on other actors and institutions. For example, a given ideal may require parliamentary endorsement but the structure of a given parliamentary system may make the achievement of this improbable. Perhaps parliament has constitutional safeguards to prevent such changes, or is simply populated by politicians who are overwhelmingly against such ideals in principle. In short then, assessing the feasibility of an ideal requires that we ask questions about the actors and institutions that are required to realise that ideal, and how best to respond to the obstacles that may be peculiar to them.

The second question, ‘feasibility when and where’, has already been discussed implicitly. Contingent obstacles will often display a high-degree of historical specificity. We saw this with the examples of both same-sex marriage and high top rates of income tax. In both cases attitudes and legislation relating to these phenomena have shifted dramatically over recent decades. We can also see that the obstacles that confront ideals are geographically particular as well. For example, the trend of rising support for marriage equality noted above does not hold for the many countries that continue to oppose marriage equality or where opposition to marriage equality has

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 812.

actually increased in recent years.¹⁹ In short, many contingent obstacles are products of a particular time and place, and what may be an irremovable obstacle in one context may not be in another. This perspective thus shows us that ideals may not necessarily satisfy feasibility conditions at all times and in all societies. At least some of the probability and stability obstacles that may confront an ideal are contingent to particular times and places.

To summarise then, obstacles to feasibility conditions take various forms. They can be fixed, referring to an obstacle that will hold in all circumstances, or contingent, referring to an obstacle that need not necessarily hold in all circumstances. Whether or not a contingent obstacle is a genuine feasibility constraint depends on whether or not it is sufficiently probable that we would be able to remove this obstacle through nonideal enterprise. It is the nature of long-term choice that it will have to navigate through various impediments that prevent an ideal from being realised immediately. However in some cases we will confront impediments that, while not absolutely fixed, are sufficiently stubborn as to be contingent obstacles that thus make an ideal infeasible: it would simply be a waste of political resources to attempt to remove it. These obstacles, fixed or contingent, can block the ideal itself or block a certain actor, institution, or group of actors or institutions from achieving the ideal. Finally they can prevent an ideal from satisfying any of the three feasibility conditions of possibility, sufficient probability, and stability.

II. Conceptualising and Assessing Feasibility

This discussion of obstacles should go some way towards concretising our previously abstract conceptualisation of ideals and feasibility conditions. The obstacle framework provides us with a model that allows us to better understand assessments of feasibility. However at present this is still only a formal account of feasibility. To further shore up this inquiry let us consider the methodological expertise demanded by different feasibility assessments. Doing this will give a sense of the interdisciplinary nature of

¹⁹ Russia provides a clear example of the latter phenomenon with opposition to same-sex marriage increasing from 59% in 2005 to 86% in 2013. See *VTsIOM*, ‘Law Banning Gay Propaganda’.

feasibility assessments while also clarifying how sensitive to nonideal factors ideal theory has to be if it is to produce ideals that can inform long-term just choice.

We noted in the previous section that *possibility* encompasses the twin concepts of logical possibility and natural possibility. We also saw that the obstacles to meeting possibility conditions are *fixed*, with the above issues of physical and logical necessity clearly lending themselves to unchanging principles. These are not examples of contingent obstacles that it would be possible to overcome either now or in the future.

How then do we assess the possibility of ideals? As possibility deals with categorical judgements on issues of logic and natural laws, assessments of an ideal's possibility is predominantly an exercise in philosophical analysis and natural scientific analysis. The former discipline should primarily look to establish whether or not a given ideal is logically coherent, something that philosophy is clearly methodologically well-suited to, while the latter discipline can establish whether it adheres to natural laws.

It might be assumed that this will require cross-disciplinary collaboration with natural scientists but this will generally not be the case. In most circumstances it is likely that political theorists can make judgements on the possibility of ideals without importing expertise from the natural sciences. This is because the obstacles that confront impossible ideals will generally be intuitive, requiring little expert knowledge. Providing their ideals are also logically possible, this will allow political theorists to quickly proceed to the much fuzzier domains of probability and stability.

Despite this, it is certainly conceivable that assessments of natural possibility will be more complex in the future. Recall first the position I defended in the previous chapter. I made the claim that questions about the compatibility of the Communist Ideal with human nature were issues of probability rather than possibility.²⁰ The rationale behind this claim was that as we appear to know that humans are definitely *capable* of the requisite altruism and honesty, the question becomes whether or not it is sufficiently probable that some future society may be able to motivate enough people to display these qualities as to make the Communist Ideal feasible. Despite this position though, it may also be the case that future advances in neuroscience will allow us to pinpoint

²⁰ See Chapter 3, Section II.

physiological processes that place hard limits on what human beings are capable of in terms of altruism, honesty and so on. Such research might be able to tell us whether some people are hardwired to be more altruistic and honest than others are. If we knew this then we may be able to quantifiably assess whether a sufficiently high enough proportion of people meet the standards of altruism and honesty required for a functioning communist society. Thus, we can see how, with sufficient data, such a discovery would move some questions about the limits of human attributes from the domain of probability to the domain of natural possibility. All of this would present fertile ground for cross-disciplinary work between political theorists and natural scientists.

Until such advances are made however it is likely best to conceptualise possibility assessments as a largely philosophical, and relatively intuitive, process. So while one cannot rule out complexities in these assessments, at present it seems likely that determining the possibility of a given ideal ought to be the most straightforward condition to assess and for that reason we will have reasonably little to say about possibility assessments. Sufficient probability and stability on the other hand evince no such simplicity or uni-disciplinarity and it is to the assessment of these conditions that we now turn. As we shall see below, understanding each category requires a range of social-scientific and historiographical tools, as well as contributions from explanatory social theories.

As we have already seen above, the binary nature of possibility makes it far too permissive a category to employ on its own, due to the undoubtedly large number of ideals that are possible but highly improbable. Informing long-term choice with ideals that are unlikely to be achieved wastes political resources and may lead to missed opportunities to pursue and achieve ideals that *can* be realised.²¹ For this fundamental reason, ideals that are to inform long-term choice ought to be *sufficiently probable*.

While questions of possibility look to philosophical analysis and natural scientific analysis, probability assessments are more dependent on social scientific analysis and historical analysis. Determining the probability of an ideal requires extensive

²¹ This position was explored primarily in response to the ‘uncertainty gambit’. See Chapter 3, Section V.

engagement with explanatory social theories that can inform our understanding of the range of options available at a given time. This is to say that probability assessments take for granted the possibility of ideals and look instead to how likely they are to be realised. Social and historical theories provide accounts of the different types of contingent obstacles that exist and the extent to which they can likely be removed.

Let us turn now to *stability*. We saw in the previous chapter that for an ideal to be stable, a society that is governed by it has to be able to return to an ‘equilibrium state’ following any deviations from stability. We also noted that we were concerned with a particular type of stability, namely a *ceteris paribus* stability, whereby the causes of instability and the forces that return the society to an equilibrium state ought to be *internal* to the ideal in question. By this I mean that an ideal is not stable if it requires external forces, such as chance foreign investment or international military support, to return it to an equilibrium state. Nor by the same token is an ideal unstable if the instability is caused by similarly external forces, such as economic downturns and ecological disasters, providing these are not necessary products of applying the ideal.

Last chapter I considered two possible forms of instability. The first is a relatively simple and intuitive type of instability produced by an ideal being over-demanding and preventing sufficient compliance from citizens. In this instance obstacles present themselves when ideals require citizens to tolerate a particular law with fixed costs over a period of time, when citizens would not be sufficiently capable of tolerating that law. The second type of stability obstacle arises when it is expected that the ideal itself will generate additional or greater costs overtime. Note that this means that an ideal may be tolerable at first but due to tendencies within the implementation of the ideal, that ideal becomes less tolerable over time.²²

In the previous chapter I noted that each stability test required different forms of analysis. Note that in the first instance testing ought to be simpler, we are primarily checking our ideal against our conception of levels of tolerance of costs, and asking if it is the case that we can expect people to accept the costs associated with this ideal. Answering this question requires philosophical analysis as well as input from social

²² For fuller accounts of definitions of the basic concepts of sufficient probability and stability see Chapter 3, Section I.

scientific disciplines. Our philosophical conception of what costs people will tolerate will likely be strengthened if it is informed by insights from social policy, psychology, and so on.

As the second stability test is similarly concerned with the costs individuals will tolerate, it requires the same social scientific inputs to model the appropriate level of the tolerance of costs. However, given that we are interested in the effects that ideals generate over time, we will also need to consider explanatory theories that model the long-term effects of particular laws. Thus in the example from the previous chapter I speculated that adherence to Robert Nozick's 'Entitlement Ideal' may lead to a concentration of wealth that would be unstable and that a limited state would be unable to recover from. Deciding whether or not this is the case would require analysis of social, historical, and economic theories that look at the long-term effects of free-market economic policies. In this sense then, it is reliant on many of the same processes and methods that are used when assessing probability.

Thus far I have discussed the different types of obstacles that ideal theorists are required to show that their ideals can either avoid or remove if they are to meet the feasibility conditions required to inform long-term choice. We have also looked at how feasibility assessments are made in each category, stressing the additional extra-philosophical disciplinary expertise required of probability and stability assessments in particular. This discussion has aimed to achieve two things. First, to provide a general account of feasibility that ought to be instructive to feasible ideal theorising generally. Second, to establish a framework that can be populated by a specific conceptualisation of feasibility, in order to show that it can be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice. In the following section I thus set aside more general concerns and focus on how one might use Marxist theory to arrive at a robust conception of feasibility for assessing prospective long-term choice informing ideals.

III. A Marxist Conception of Feasibility

In this section I want to outline how Marxist theory can conceptualise feasibility conditions and the different obstacles inherent within them. This should not be read as

an exhaustive account of feasibility. For one it focuses largely on sociological, political, and economic factors, and does not consider other important fields such as psychology. It is thus to an extent an indicative modelling of Marxist feasibility. Nevertheless I believe it successfully demonstrates how beneficial this approach can be, leading as it does to a set of markedly stringent feasibility conditions.

As we shall see, this stringency is a product of Marxism's emphasis on a range of *structurally necessary obstacles* that stress the instability of capitalist economies and the incompatibility of egalitarian redistribution with capitalist systems of production. In theorising just choice within capitalism accordingly, the Marxist conception of feasibility proves itself to be particularly exclusive, rejecting liberal ideals as a whole on the grounds that they are premised on capitalist economies. The Marxist conception of feasibility thus provides a significant endorsement of the long-term approach to just choice, as its stringency and exclusivity ought to give ideal theorists who adhere to it a greater confidence in the feasibility of their ideals. Conversely, an approach to feasibility that is too inclusive due to failing to anticipate the full range of obstacles to ideal realisation may lead to one wasting limited political resources on ideals that later turn out to be infeasible.

The Marxist conception of feasibility, moreover, casts doubt on the validity of short-term choice in contemporary societies. It states that capitalism's resistance to reform makes it difficult to implement progressive changes within market systems in the first place, while also making it hard to retain those changes that are made. While this is not a logically *necessary* criticism of short-term choice, it is a serious practical challenge to it within capitalist societies. Given that it is these societies that we inhabit and that contemporary political theory aims to improve, this is a significant criticism. In both strengthening long-term choice and raising serious questions about short-term choice, the Marxist approach to feasibility allows me to meet the third Key Objective of this thesis, in showing the conditions in which it is defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice.

In explicating this Marxist approach to feasibility I will look at four main points. I will first consider the claim that social relations in capitalist societies logically lead to an increasing concentration of wealth in fewer hands, causing progressively less-

egalitarian distributions of wealth. Moreover, I will show that by going unchecked this increasing wealth inequality can lead to cyclical economic crises. This constitutes two significant contingent obstacles confronting those ideals that look to work within capitalism. (a) It reduces the probability of successful progressive reforms of capitalist societies, as more egalitarian, patterned redistributions of wealth will be undermined by the tendency for distributions to become less egalitarian. In this sense it thus challenges ideals that aim to combine market economies with egalitarian distributive principles. (b) The crisis-prone character of capitalist economies undermines liberal, capitalist-based ideals more generally, due to the inherent instability of such systems.

The second point will look at the structure of social power in capitalist societies and how this may make it difficult to regulate wealth distribution within them. If this second point holds then this will amplify the effect of both obstacles noted in the previous paragraph; in making it harder still to enforce redistributive principles of justice, or to regulate the economy to prevent recurring crises. The third point will address the ‘feasible when and where?’ question, by stressing how the structure of social power noted above means that it is largely material forces, rather than moral force, which leads to ideals being realised. As such, for ideals to be feasible they ought to have strong synergy with the structures of the society they look to emerge from. My fourth and final point in this section further solidifies the obstacles noted above by stressing their *historically necessary* character. The central idea here is the fact that while these obstacles are contingent they are also necessary products of capitalism itself, and thus they can only be overcome by overcoming capitalism.

(1) I want to premise my Marxist conception of feasibility on Marx’s model of the general logic of capitalist development. We can illustrate how this logic functions with a hypothetical example. To begin, imagine a factory that produces a particular commodity, let us say shoes. The factory is owned and managed by a well-meaning capitalist who pays his employees a high wage and affords them generous working conditions, long paid-holidays, weekends off, and so on. Perhaps on top of this, each employee makes and assembles each pair of shoes in its entirety, from sole to laces. Now imagine that another shoe factory opens across the road from the first one. This firm is owned and managed by a mean-spirited capitalist who pays her employees

considerably lower wages, grants them fewer holidays, and generally treats them poorly. Moreover she also employs a highly rationalised technical division of labour, with one group of employees making soles, another group of employees making uppers, another group attaching uppers to soles and so on.

For various reasons we can imagine that life in the first factory would be more enjoyable than life in the second factory. Pay, terms and conditions, and quality of work are all better in the former than they are in the latter. However in market terms we can also imagine that the shoes made in the second factory would be lower priced than those from the first factory as production in the second factory is more efficient, and less money is tied up in wages. It would seem probable that over time, market forces would lead to the mean-spirited capitalist gaining a larger and larger share of the market, as more and more customers purchased her cheaper shoes. Without any changes in the production processes in either factory this trend would likely continue until the first factory went out of business altogether. The well-meaning capitalist would thus have the choice to either allow his business to go under or to compete with his mean-spirited rival. If he chose to compete then he would have to make shoes that were priced at least as competitively as those of his rival. In order to do this he would have to decrease employee pay, and introduce a more rational technical division of labour in his factory in place of the previous system that was more rewarding for his employees.

One of the important points that comes across in this example is that any decision to compete that is made by the well-meaning capitalist need not be a product of pure self-interest, nor of any other form of morally dubious reasoning. Indeed, our well-meaning capitalist seems to have little choice but to adopt the cutthroat measures of his mean-spirited rival. If he fails to do this then his factory will go out of business, his employees will lose their jobs, and he will lose ownership of the means of production that allow him to be a capitalist with a, relatively, greater degree of autonomy, rather than a worker who has no meaningful choice but to sell his labour power. Thus, while distinguishing between a ‘mean-spirited’ capitalist and a ‘well-meaning’ capitalist simplifies our example and furnishes us with helpful names for the central characters,

one of the strengths of Marx's approach is that it emphasises the structural pressures inherent to the system itself, rather than ethical categories such as blame.²³

Let us return to our example. Assuming that the well-meaning capitalist has decided that he will try to compete with his rival, what would happen next? Each capitalist would probably attempt to gain a market-advantage over the other by selling their shoes at the lowest price. As stated above this would be achieved through decreasing employee pay, and increasing productivity, perhaps by replacing employees with cheaper and more efficient, automated processes. In these circumstances, rising unemployment and depressed rates of pay would lead to a fall in effective demand as people were less able to purchase commodities, including shoes. This in turn would lead to a 'crisis of overproduction' where supply outstripped effective demand, and as a result of this one of the factories would perhaps have to close down, leading to further unemployment, as it failed to generate the capital necessary to continue producing and trading goods. In these circumstances the surviving factory might be able to buy up part or all of the productive means of the failed factory, thus expanding their business and gaining a greater share of the market.²⁴

The central point to take from this example is that the drive for profit is a necessary product of the structure of capitalist societies, rather than a choice made at the discretion of individual capitalists, as capitalists who fail to compete will see their businesses collapse. As this process is structurally necessary, these crises are unavoidable and will continue to happen as the share of a given market will progressively be held by fewer and fewer businesses. From this it follows that crises of overproduction ought to become more marked and have graver consequences over

²³ This is not to suggest that Marx's approach excludes moral commentary altogether but it does appear that this is not to the main focus of this aspect of his analysis. This is evident in his remarks that in his model of capitalism's logic, he '[does not] by any means depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colours. But individuals are dealt with [...] only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests.' He goes on to contrast this with a perspective that seeks to make 'the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains'. See Karl Marx, 'Preface to the First Edition' in *Capital, Vol. I*, p. 91. For discussion of Marx's emphasis on structural forces over ethical responsibility see Richard Nordahl, 'Marx on Moral Commentary: Ideology and Science' in *Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought: Critical Assessments – Second Series* ed. by Bob Jessop and Russell Wheatley (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 416; and Bill Martin, *Ethical Marxism: The Categorical Imperative of Liberation* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), p. 39.

²⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, p. 175. For a concise summary of Marx's theory of the logic of capitalism see Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 52-55.

time as the businesses involved will be larger with each passing crisis and as such the consequences of their collapsing will be more severe.²⁵

If this model is accurate then it suggests that liberal ideals of justice, i.e. those premised on capitalism, are confronted by two potentially significant contingent obstacles. The first is the fact that wealth in capitalist economies becomes concentrated over time, as competition between capitalists leads to falling wages, unemployment, and increasingly small numbers of businesses controlling given markets. This may be an obstacle to liberal egalitarian ideals that wish to combine capitalist markets with egalitarian distributions of wealth. It essentially suggests that the probability of achieving such an ideal is diminished due to capitalism's natural logic moving society towards *inegalitarianism*. In the language of the framework established in the previous two sections, this constitutes an obstacle on the sufficient probability path that would prevent liberal egalitarian ideals from meeting feasibility conditions.

The second obstacle is perhaps more significant as it affects *all* liberal ideals. This suggests that capitalism is necessarily *unstable* due to the fact that it naturally experiences increasingly severe periodic economic crises. During these crises we would expect to see falling living standards and high levels of unemployment, both of which would generally get worse with each new crisis. We can imagine that these costs would be too great to bear. As such, any ideal premised on capitalism would meet an obstacle on the stability path that would prevent it from meeting feasibility conditions.

Before reaching this conclusion though an important objection has to be considered. The above example implies that customers are hyper-rational actors making purchasing decisions purely based on price. Yet this clearly overlooks numerous aspects of consumer identity. It fails to account for important variables such as the status that is associated with particular brands as well as the ethical appeal of some purchases over others. In the case of the latter point, some customers may opt to pay more for a product that is made in a factory where the owner treats her employees more justly or only uses fairly sourced materials. These counterpoints suggest that the well-meaning factory owner may be able to continue successfully producing his more

²⁵ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 17.

expensive yet also more ethically appealing or fashionable shoes, rather than being forced into competition with the mean-spirited capitalist.

One response to these points is to stress that while these factors are relevant they will be significantly more relevant in some markets than others. Being in a position to choose to pay more for a product solely on the grounds of its ethical appeal or status prestige is a luxury that those with very limited resources will not enjoy. Similarly, just as there are external factors that discourage the logic illustrated in the above model there are also external factors that encourage it. The shareholder system, for example, compels managers to optimise production in order to maximise profits and, in turn, dividend payments.

Despite the validity of these responses to the customer conceptualisation criticism, these challenges also highlight a more general issue here. The responses themselves demonstrate how many relevant factors are omitted from the Marxist model. Consider for instance the role that states play in saving failing business, or using anti-monopolisation legislation to prevent individual businesses gaining too large a share of the market. We also know that in many states employers are not free to arbitrarily change the pay and conditions of their employees, nor to sack them, given that the bargaining position of trade unions as well as employee protection laws often prevent this. Moreover, for each of these phenomena that act to prevent the Marxist logic of capitalism from unfolding, there are counter-forces that act to support it.

In short it seems that the above model is a non-representative conceptualisation of capitalism that overlooks state and legal oversight of the economy, as well as the multi-faceted nature of consumers, employers, and workers. There is a range of political processes, as well as legal, cultural, and ideational ones, that may prevent capitalism from developing according to the logic suggested above.

A Marxist response to this is to stress that the above model does not actually intend to capture how actual capitalist systems function. The variables that determine how economies function are almost certainly too numerous to model with any confidence and for this reason it is necessary when studying economics, as with most fields of scientific or social scientific inquiry, to analyse particular processes in *abstraction*

from their actual context.²⁶ We can call such models *abstracting idealisations*.²⁷ There is a parallel with the use of laboratory conditions in experiments in the natural sciences, where, by removing variables from the study of a given phenomenon, one can identify how laws of nature operate unimpeded by these external factors.

Just as these natural laws will not function in natural conditions in the same way as they will in laboratory conditions, so these Marxist predictions about economic processes will be altered when considered in the real world, rather than in artificial, abstract conditions. Laws of capitalist society then, which describe the necessary way in which a social process develops are only actually certain in abstraction. In real conditions, the necessary logic of the economy confronts a range of political, cultural, legal, and environmental factors that change the course of this development. When applying our abstract models of capitalist development to real world conditions, laws of capitalism become mere ‘tendencies’. Predictive certainty about how capitalist systems function is replaced by predictive uncertainty about the precise development of these processes.²⁸

As we saw above, the Marxist conception of feasibility suggests two obstacles that, if accurate, pose a serious threat to liberal ideals of justice. However we may feel unpersuaded as to why we should take these obstacles seriously. I have considered a response to the claim that the Marxist model is unrealistic. However this response seemed to concede too much, stressing that the logic it identifies only fully holds in abstraction, and not in real world conditions. In order for the above obstacles to pose a serious challenge to liberal ideals, the Marxist approach has to show why its logic of capitalism remains pertinent to real societies. This response has to explain why the tendency of capitalist economies to lead to concentrations of wealth and instability is

²⁶ Marx discusses the process of abstraction in Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)* (London: Penguin in Association with New Left Review, 1858/1973), pp. 100-101. Bertell Ollman offers one of the most extensive treatments of this aspect of Marx’s method. See for example Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), Ch. 5, and Bertell Ollman, ‘Critical Realism in the Light of Marx’s Process of Abstraction’ in *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* ed. by José López & Garry Potter (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), pp. 290-291.

²⁷ The following chapter engages extensively with the concept of idealisation, with abstracting idealisations discussed at length. See Chapter 5, Section I.

²⁸ For a discussion of how laws formulated in abstract, ‘closed systems’ translate into ‘tendencies’ in ‘open’, real world, systems, see Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar’s Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 58-59.

still problematic for liberal ideals, when intuitively one might assume that capitalism's instabilities and its inequalities can be corrected by well-intentioned state intervention in line with a given liberal ideal of justice.

(2) The response to this concern can be found in Marxist conceptualisations of the relationship between society's economic level and its other constituent levels. The metaphor of society consisting of an economic 'structure', or more commonly 'base', and a legal, political, and ideational 'superstructure' illustrates the general character of these models. For Marxists, the latter is seen as rising from the former, with the character taken by the former thus, to a greater or lesser degree, shaping the character of the latter.²⁹

The specifics of the relationship between base and superstructure can be fleshed out in different ways. Some, such as G.A. Cohen and William H. Shaw see it in technological terms, identifying how changes in the technologies used to produce goods determine the character of relations of production, which in turn determines the character of superstructural levels.³⁰ For example, the invention of new, specialised, and large-scale, factory-based machinery, might be argued to have been the cause of feudal society being replaced by capitalist society. This interpretation may focus on how factory technologies rendered pre-industrial productive technologies obsolete. With the advent of modern machinery, goods could no longer be competitively produced with traditional manual tools. As such, many who lived in smaller rural communities would have been forced to migrate to new urban centres of production to find employment. Essentially then, changes in productive technologies made old means of production obsolete, which in turn made old *relations* of production obsolete, as the new centre of urban productive power, with its system of wage labour, replaced the previous, rural, feudal system where peasants were indentured to a ruling aristocrat.³¹

²⁹ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859/1969), 'Preface'.

³⁰ Prominent examples of technological conceptions of the base and superstructure metaphor include, William H. Shaw, "'The Handmill Gives You the Feudal Lord': Marx's Technological Determinism" *History and Theory* Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 155-176, (1979), and G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

³¹ The primacy of technological change may be inferred from Marx and Engels's comment that 'the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby

From these economic changes then came changes to the legal constitution of society, as these forms of indentured servitude were replaced by a system where all individuals have formal legal equality and are free to buy and sell labour-power.³² More generally, the ideational superstructure changed to reflect the new base of economic power, with cultural and political systems reflecting the interests of the now dominant capitalist class. Applying this perspective to capitalism today suggests that those wishing to understand how a society's legal and political systems operate ought to analyse the power dynamics within that society's economic base. In sum, it is an approach that assumes that the interests of dominant economic powers shape the form of society's superstructure.

This relatively structured reading of the base and superstructure metaphor is not endorsed by all Marxist theorists, with others, for example Friedrich Engels and Louis Althusser, seeking to characterise the relationship in less technologically centric terms. One way of doing this is to stress the 'relative autonomy' of society's constituent levels, by arguing that economics does not always determine the form that other levels take but only does so 'in the last instance.'³³ If this is correct then developments in politics or law may largely function independently of economic factors. For example, it may be that the constituent levels of the superstructure are only determined by economic processes and interests during particularly acute periods.

A further, perhaps more intuitive position, also emerges from the metaphor of base and superstructure. It is generally the case that wealth correlates strongly with social power.³⁴ Consider the relative opportunities available to the wealthy compared with the poor. In capitalist society the main source of significant wealth is through

the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.' See Marx and Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 16.

³² Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Marxist Internet Archive, 1847/1999), p. 49.

³³ Engels is famous for using the expression 'in the last instance' to refer to the relationship between society's economic base and the component parts of the superstructure. In a reasonably extensive discussion of this he rejects any idea that economic factors are 'the *sole* determining factor' in causing historical change as 'meaningless, abstract, and absurd'. See Friedrich Engels, 'Engels in London to J. Bloch in Berlin, Written 21st September, 1890' *Marxists.org* (1890/1943). The idea of economic factors only affecting the direction of the other autonomous levels of society in 'the last instance' forms one of the bases of Louis Althusser's structural Marxism. See Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 111-113.

³⁴ For some of Marx's comments on the social power that comes with money, see Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', pp. 180-181.

successful capitalist enterprises. Therefore, if those with social power are those who benefit from the current system then we can expect them to use their power to advance claims that reinforce and justify this system and their own role within it.

Irrespective of the particular aspects of the base and superstructure metaphor that are emphasised by different theorists, we can identify two important points that emerge from this model. The first is that purely superstructural changes may be unlikely to succeed and even less likely to affect permanent change unless there are corresponding changes in the economic base of society. This is because superstructural levels are, to some extent, a *product* of more fundamental economic forces. What this entails is that the distribution of wealth and the stability of the economy should not be seen as phenomena that are separate from more basic economic facts about society, but rather as *epiphenomena* of the economic base. That capitalism tends towards inequalitarian distributions of wealth, and instability does not happen by chance but because of the necessary, competitive and profit-based structure of capitalist economies outlined above. This is what Marx is referring to when he stresses that the distribution of ‘the means of consumption’, i.e. wealth and property, is a product of the ‘distribution of the means of production’, that is the system of private property and capital.³⁵

The second point is that *ideological* forces play a prominent role in maintaining the status quo in any society. Recall from the previous chapter that ideologies are false beliefs that reflect the interests of the ruling class and help sustain social structures that benefit that class. In the case of capitalist societies this means that ideologies will support the profit-based interests of capitalists, through manipulation of media, culture, and so on. Ideologies are thus a product of economic interests, and reflect the distribution of power within society. It is likely these will primarily act to reinforce the necessary processes noted in the previous point.

³⁵ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, pp. 11-12. This point is made elsewhere by Marx when he states that, ‘Distribution is itself a product of production, not only in its object, in that only the results of production can be distributed, but also its form, in that the specific kind of participation in production determines the specific forms of distribution, i.e. the pattern of participation in distribution.’ See Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 95. Also see his remarks that attempts to combat private property through ‘confiscation or a progressive tax [...] ends necessarily with the restoration of [...] private property and all the elements of civil society’. See Karl Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’ in *Karl Marx: Early Texts*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1843 /1971), p. 96.

For these reasons then, attempts to use state intervention to correct capitalism's tendencies towards inequality and instability will meet strong resistance. This resistance is in part a product of vested interests possessing a disproportionate amount of control over key political, legal, cultural, and ideational structures. More fundamentally though, these obstacles are products inherent to capitalism itself, which are further entrenched by the unequal distribution of social power noted above. For Marxists, distributive injustices then are not a chance feature of capitalist societies but rather a necessary one. They are the product of a stubborn social structure whereby social power correlates with economic power. Unless we alter the system of economic production that leads to this imbalance of power then we will always face an uphill struggle to make any distributive or regulatory improvements.³⁶

What does this mean for the two obstacles identified in the previous section? In the case of the stability obstacle confronting liberal ideals, we will find that attempts to regulate the economy to prevent crises may often confront powerful economic interests. For example it is unlikely that market-leading businesses will want to see their profits cut by regulations, even if those regulations are necessary to prevent future crises of overproduction. Through direct and indirect political and ideational interventions they will often be able to prevent regulatory legislation from passing or ensure that it passes on better terms for themselves. Much the same logic applies to the probability obstacle confronting liberal egalitarianism. Again, attempts to redistribute wealth will often be confronted by hostility. Those with more to lose but greater social power will use similar political and ideational mechanisms to try to undermine these policies. The base and superstructure metaphor thus suggests that solutions premised on state intervention that aim to overcome these obstacles will be unlikely to succeed. As these obstacles are a necessary product of capitalism they can only be removed by replacing, rather than reforming, capitalism. The Marxist conception of feasibility thus casts serious doubt on the feasibility of liberal ideals, or any other ideals, which aim to work within capitalist society.

(3) Marxism also provides a response to the 'Feasible when and where?' question, by claiming that it is material forces, rather than superstructural forces, that are the

³⁶ This point is also highlighted by Callinicos. See Callinicos, *Equality*, p. 29.

primary drivers of social change. It claims that for the most part new societies are not achieved through the strength of a given ideal's moral convincingness but rather because economic forces have reached a certain point of development where social change becomes inevitable. This is the process we saw in the above example of the change from feudalism to capitalism, where economic developments led to political developments.³⁷

We have seen from points (1) and (2) above that Marxism postulates particular tendencies in the development of capitalism. These tendencies indicate that certain circumstances, namely cyclical crises of capitalism, will emerge and that these may, over time, become increasingly likely to lead to significant social change. As such, ideals that do not have strong synergy with these structurally necessary economic conditions may face a sufficient probability obstacle, as they will lack the motivational force that comes with this synergy and thus be unable to generate the support required for an ideal to be realised. If this Marxist modelling of capitalist crises is correct then liberal ideals, which rely on an unstable market system, may be blocked by this stability obstacle. If capitalism tends towards inequalities and crisis then ideals that are premised on capitalism ought to become increasingly unlikely to motivate support as these problems become more marked.

(4) As a final point I would like to stress a general characteristic of the Marxist conception of feasibility that has been implicit in the three points discussed above. Recall the key distinction that was made between the fixed obstacles that generally populate the possibility path, and conditional obstacles that generally populate the probability and stability paths. We saw how, where the former have to be avoided, the latter can, at least potentially and with the correct nonideal labour, be removed. What is notable about the contingent obstacles that can be derived from Marxist theory is that they are necessary features of capitalist societies.

There are three important obstacles that the above Marxist account of feasibility identifies. The first relates to the logic of capitalist development and the fact that it tends towards inegalitarian distributions of wealth. The second relates to the same

³⁷ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique*, 'Preface'.

logic leading to cyclical economic crises. The third is that for ideals to be feasible it is not sufficient for them to be morally persuasive, they also have to have synergy with society's structural tendencies. All of these obstacles are entrenched by the dominant role that economic forces play in society. We have seen that these may be prominent obstacles in the way of two types of ideal. First, liberal ideals in general face the stability obstacle produced by the crisis-prone character of the capitalist economic system. Second, liberal egalitarian ideals in particular will face the sufficient probability obstacle of trying to reform incorrigible capitalist institutions. In both cases these obstacles are compounded by the concern that liberal ideals may lack the necessary synergy with social conditions required in order to be feasible. Moreover, the contingent obstacles that they confront, are necessary products of capitalist economic processes, and thus only removable by removing capitalism. What this means is that according to the Marxist conception of feasibility, liberal ideals are infeasible.

IV. Challenges to the Marxist Approach

However there may yet be problems with the Marxist approach. Chief among these is the concern that the Marxist model is simply *too* stringent. In this section I will address two criticisms that stem from this concern. Firstly I will consider whether it is the case that no ideal will be able to satisfy Marxist feasibility conditions. In response I will show that some forms of socialism are clearly able to avoid the contingent feasibility obstacles that obstruct liberal ideals. Secondly I will consider the more serious challenge that the Marxist approach rules out ideals as a whole as it theorises social change in purely structural terms. If this is the case then ideal theory and just choice will be lost to economic determinism. I will show that this second criticism also fails as we should understand the set of processes identified in the base and superstructure metaphor as only one, albeit important, driver of change in capitalist societies.

While it is not within this thesis's remit to offer any particular ideal theory, it is necessary to indicate how this model of feasibility does not exclude *all* ideals. Notably, socialism should be able to avoid the obstacles that the Marxist conception of

feasibility places in the path of liberal ideals. The fundamental reason why socialist ideals meet Marxist conditions of feasibility is because it rejects the system of private property in the means of production, the system that underpins liberalism's inability to avoid these obstacles. In having an economic base premised on democratic control over production, rather than competitive market mechanisms, there will not be the same profit driven logic that undermines attempts to distribute wealth in a more just manner within capitalism. As Cohen stresses, 'so demanding an equality' as is favoured by egalitarians cannot be achieved within capitalist societies.³⁸ However it can be achieved within a socialist society.

Socialist ideals will also not be affected by capitalist ideologies in the same way. While it is undoubtedly the case that capitalist ideological forces will be, in general, significantly more hostile to socialist ideals than they will be to liberal egalitarian ones, if the ideal *was* achieved then ideology would cease to be a relevant factor. A major problem for liberal egalitarianism is not only that it may be difficult to realise just distributions of wealth in the face of capitalist ideology, essentially the same problem that socialism faces, but that in aiming to work within the confines of market systems, if the distribution is achieved it is likely to be continuously undermined by ideological forces until it is destabilised. While socialism may in some senses be harder to realise in the first place, in replacing market mechanisms, the ideological forces that necessarily undermine liberal egalitarianism both *en route* to the ideal and once the ideal has been achieved, will cease to be a factor.³⁹

Socialism also avoids the synergy obstacle that suggests that liberal ideals will be unable to motivate support due to their reliance on capitalism. Firstly, the institutional character of socialism is a direct response to the failings of capitalism. It suggests that common, democratic ownership over society's productive means will yield a fairer, more rational, system of production than one that is controlled by market forces and

³⁸ Cohen, 'Is Socialism Inseparable from Common Ownership?', pp. 1-2.

³⁹ I do not intend to give the impression that any road to socialism is a simple or easy one, nor that socialism in practice would be unproblematic. These are major issues that constitute huge research projects in themselves. However as I stated earlier, my objective in this chapter is to show how long-term just choice can be pursued ahead of short-term just choice, and the important role Marxism can play in doing this. More generally, as noted above, the role of this thesis is primarily to underlabour for ideal theory, not to present an ideal theory itself.

where need is only recognised in the form of effective demand. Secondly, support for socialism is tied to crises of capitalism. As capitalism experiences more crises of increasing severity, more people will see that socialism provides this fairer, more rational system of production.⁴⁰

An interesting point emerges from our comparison of the relative feasibilities of liberal and socialist ideals when measured against Marxist conceptualisations of feasibility. According to these standards, the former will likely be infeasible while the latter will be feasible. However, what is interesting is that liberal ideals, including liberal egalitarian ones, are far more *similar* to contemporary society than socialist ideals are. Despite this fact though, it is socialist ideals that meet these standards of feasibility and as such society is infinitely *closer* to a stable socialist ideal than it is to a stable liberal ideal.⁴¹

So socialist ideals are able to avoid the feasibility obstacles that obstruct liberal ideals. However there is also a more pertinent criticism, which suggests that the Marxist conception of feasibility does not require *any* ideals at all, socialist or otherwise, as economic processes are the only meaningful drivers of social change. If it is economic processes rather than moral arguments that determine the success or failure of a political project, then what space is left for ideals and ideal theorising? Indeed in such conditions it would appear that it may make more sense to shift intellectual resources towards *predicting*, rather than prescribing, future societies. If this concern is proven correct then both ideal theory and just choice would be lost to economic determinism. In essence, the Marxist conception of feasibility would have proven too much, in not only ruling out infeasible ideals but *all* ideals.

Fortunately we can show that this concern does not hold and that the Marxist conception of feasibility is in fact compatible with ideal theory and just choice. Most

⁴⁰ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 19. See also, Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1880/1970), especially Chapter 3.

⁴¹ Recall that when measuring the distance between contemporary nonideal conditions and ideals we can either refer to ‘similarity’ or ‘closeness’. Where similarity refers to how approximately a given nonideal situation corresponds to an ideal, closeness refers to the ‘nonideal distance’ which exists between contemporary conditions and realising the ideal in full. See Chapter 2. Section VI. Also, it is worth noting that whether or not one accepts this modelling of feasibility or the particular claims made in this section, the broader point, i.e. that greater similarity does not necessarily equate to greater closeness, is of useful general application.

fundamentally the base and superstructure model, like the model of the logic of capitalism discussed before it, should be understood as an *abstracting idealisation*. We saw earlier that such an approach is necessary in order to comprehend complex real world phenomena, as it allows us to isolate and understand key processes within these phenomena. In the case of the base and superstructure metaphor this allows us to see how economic factors may be particularly significant in shaping the overall character of society.

However by virtue of the fact that this knowledge pertains to an abstract conception of society it will not be fully applicable to actual societies. Laws derived in these circumstances, can only be *tendencies* in real world conditions where they have to interact with numerous other processes and variables. One such variable is the role of ideals in guiding political action. In real societies people have to be persuaded to undertake certain courses of action over others and moral reasoning can play a significant role in this. Moreover, major social changes do not only occur during structurally sensitive periods but at other times as well. Again, ideals can help create or support these changes.

How then are we best to strike a balance between the abstract model of the base and superstructure metaphor and real societies where moral reasoning, and thus just choice, are significant factors? There is no definite answer to this, however it would be unwise to reject the importance of either. Perhaps it is best to see ideals and just choices as being constrained by these more structural factors. This corresponds with Marx's famous remark that, '[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already'.⁴² Ideals may be seen as an important part of this process of making history, an aspect of the attempts by individuals to shape the world around them. However the success of these attempts, and of ideals and just choices, will be tied up with other factors, which are outside the control of individuals.

While we may thus never rule out a particular ideal in an absolute sense, the structure of capitalist society will make some ideals more likely to be feasible than others. Thus

⁴² Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marxist Internet Archive, 1853/1999), p. 5.

we can accept that ideals have an important role to play in political change without rejecting the claim that ideals do not operate alone in this process and that those that have strong synergy with society's structural tendencies may be more likely to be feasible.

This Marxist account of feasibility thus raises some important questions about the feasibility of liberal ideals while also suggesting how socialist ideals may be able to avoid these obstacles. More than this though, I believe it makes a compelling case in favour of long-term choice. Recall that I want to show that it can be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice. The Marxist model of feasibility responds to this in two significant ways. First it conceptualises a stringent and exclusive model of feasibility that admits relatively few ideals. While this is not in itself proof of the validity of a feasibility model, if this model is indeed valid then this exclusivity will allow us to proceed to long-term choice with more confidence, buoyed by the knowledge that the ideal we use has met stringent feasibility conditions.

Moreover, this model of feasibility also raises questions about the efficacy of short-term choice. Short-term choice aims to make society more similar to a given ideal, however if the assumptions on which the Marxist account of feasibility rest are accurate then we can be doubtful that any changes to reform capitalism will be easily achieved and that those that are achieved will not be stable. In order to make stable changes it may be necessary to move beyond capitalism in a fashion that only long-term choice can do.

Finally, if the Marxist conception of feasibility is valid then it raises questions about the dominant approach to feasibility offered by John Rawls's conception of 'realistic utopianism'. By the conditions identified in this chapter, liberal egalitarian ideals such as Rawls, premised as they are on reforming capitalist economies, would be both insufficiently probable and unstable. As such they would be unrealistic, or alternatively, 'utopian' rather than 'realistically utopian'.⁴³

⁴³ Ann Phillips notes how failure to see the necessary relationship between production and distribution will lead to the incorrect assumption that one can 'pick out the "good" elements of a market society while discarding or modifying the "bad".' See Ann Phillips, 'Egalitarians and the Market: Dangerous Minds' *Social Theory and Practice* Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 439-462 (2008), p. 458.

Before concluding this chapter I would like to consider one final challenge to the Marxist conception of feasibility. It might be suggested that a problem with Marxist feasibility is that its stringency permits too few ideals. One might accept that long-term choice requires a degree of exclusivity but in rejecting all liberal ideals, Marxism pushes this too far. The problem here though is not with the Marxist conception of feasibility but rather with the reality of capitalist societies that it identifies. It is the latter, not the former, that makes liberal ideals infeasible. Providing that this characterisation of capitalist societies is correct we cannot object to the feasibility conditions that emerge from it. We want feasibility to be robust in order to ensure that the ideals that inform long-term choice can realistically be achieved. However, should it be the case that this is *not* an accurate conceptualisation of capitalist society then we would require a better model of capitalism and in turn a conceptualisation of feasibility within capitalism that more accurately captured this reality. In this case it may be that a more permissive conception of feasibility would best perform this function. In either case, how permissive a set of feasibility conditions is should be determined by social reality, not by the desire for a broader range of ideals.

V. Conclusion

I began this chapter by offering a formal account of feasibility, focusing on the two classes of ‘obstacles’ - fixed and contingent - and the different methods involved in assessing each of the three feasibility conditions: possibility, probability, and stability. From here I looked to populate this account by drawing on Marxist theory. In doing this we saw the particular obstacles that might be seen to obstruct liberal ideals, due to capitalism’s tendencies to lead to inegalitarian distributions of wealth and to periodic, destabilising economic crises. These concerns were compounded by more fundamental Marxist theories about base and superstructure from which we derived the claim that attempts to regulate capitalist market-forces in order to secure more just patterns of distribution or to prevent economic crises may be significantly undermined unless we also alter the economic processes that these phenomena proceed from, i.e. by replacing capitalism itself. In replacing competitive capitalist social relations with democratic public ownership, it was suggested why socialism might be able to meet

Marxism's feasibility conditions where liberalism cannot. As noted above, this may lead one to conclude that Rawls's ideal of justice, along with other liberal egalitarian ideals, may fail to meet the feasibility conditions required by realistic utopianism.

This discussion allowed me to meet the third Key Objective of this thesis. Recall that I wanted to show that it can be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice, despite the relatively greater risks that one might assume accompany the former approach. The Marxist conception of feasibility does this in one sense by providing a stringent and exclusive conception of feasibility, which, all other things being equal, decreases the chances of political resources being wasted on ideals that more permissive conceptions of feasibility might admit. It meets the third Key Objective in a further sense by stating that short-term choice may struggle to advance meaningful reforms given the structurally necessary incorrigibility of capitalism that makes prospective progressive change less probable, and successful progressive change less stable. The same obstacles that prevent liberal ideals from satisfying long-term feasibility conditions undermine the viability of short-term reforms of capitalism. While this is thus not a definitive criticism of short-term choice in essence, it does raise serious questions about its viability in practical terms, by doubting its capacity to support significant reform within capitalist societies.

We saw in Chapter 1 that one can formally distinguish ideal theory and nonideal theory quite easily: the former generates ideals of justice, while the latter puts these ideals to use in either short-term or long-term just choices. However what has been shown both here and in the preceding chapter is that this formal relationship fails to capture the necessary complexities of the real relationship between the two constituent enterprises of theories of justice. Underpinning this is the clear fact that should we wish to make long-term just choices it is necessary to have much more of a dialogue between ideal theory and nonideal theory. While it is not necessary for ideal theory to be informed by *normative* nonideal theory *per se*, the former certainly has to be aware of a broad range of nonideal factors if the ideals it arrives at are to meet feasibility conditions. As Brian E. Hendrix remarks, '[i]f we do not know how to predict where social change is

possible, then it seems unwise to begin planning strongly for [...] social reforms toward a goal that may not be socially possible under any conditions.⁴⁴

For this reason it is prudent that to say while ideal theory retains *logical* priority, nonideal considerations often ought to have *temporal* priority.⁴⁵ This means that while nonideal *theory* as an exercise in plotting a course to ideal realisation through just choices is still reliant on having an ideal to work towards, it is necessary that in determining our ideals we have a keen understanding of feasibility conditions and the various obstacles that they may create that will prevent certain ideals from being feasible. Failure to do this will likely lead to wasting political resources on ideals that we may later discover are not feasible.

Having now discussed feasibility in some detail, the following chapter will turn to a very different aspect of ideal theory methodology. Where the previous two chapters have sought to understand the necessary connection between ideals and nonideal, ‘real world’, factors, Chapter 5 will consider ‘idealisation’, that is the intentional use of conceptions of real world phenomena that are not accurate representations of those phenomena. In doing this we will see whether there is a necessary tension between these two aspects of feasible ideal theory methodology, and by extension if a long-term approach to just choice can still be viable.

⁴⁴ Burke A. Hendrix, ‘Where Should We Expect Change in Non-Ideal Theory?’ *Political Theory* Vol. 41, No. 1, Pp. 116-143 (2013), p. 133.

⁴⁵ This claim is made by both Simmons, p.36, and Hendrix, p. 133.

5. Idealisation and Just Choice

Thus far this discussion has focused on the *product* of ideal theories of justice, i.e. ideals themselves. In Chapter 2 I defended the ‘ideal claim’, that ideals are necessary to inform just choice and in Chapters 3 and 4 I sought to show the conditions ideals have to meet if they are to perform this choice informing role. In focusing on ideals in this manner I have not offered any significant discussion on the *process* of ideal theories of justice; by which I mean the way that one formulates the actual ideals of justice themselves. To put the same point slightly differently, though the bulk of this discussion has very much been on the subject of ideal theory methodology it has said little about the actual *methods* inherent to this process. It is to this issue that we turn in this chapter.

The method that is at the centre of the process of theorising ideals of justice is *idealisation*. Idealisation refers to the intentional use of non-representative conceptualisations of real world phenomena that, in bracketing certain real world concerns and facts, allow one to pursue theoretical inquiries one would not logically be able to.¹

In this chapter I want to defend three key functions that are performed by idealisation. Of particular significance is the *normative* function that, by ‘assuming away’ real world compliance issues and unfavourable objective conditions, generates ideals of justice not constrained by contemporary society’s limitations. It is thus necessary for normatively accurate ideals of justice.

In making this claim I anticipate two significant, closely connected challenges. First there is the concern that the necessity of idealisation conflicts with the necessity of feasibility assessments. The previous two chapters have sought to show why the ideals that inform long-term choice have to be extremely sensitive to non-ideal conditions. Idealisation on the other hand is concerned with bracketing these conditions. This

¹ ‘Idealisation’ can be used to refer both to the method and the assumptions it employs. These assumptions can also be referred to as ‘idealised premises’ or ‘idealised assumptions’.

appears to suggest at the very least a tension between two major aspects of feasible ideal theorising, if not indeed an impasse. The second concern is that even if we accept that idealisations are necessary if we wish to generate the theoretical distance required to arrive at normatively accurate ideals of justice, we may worry that the ideals that emerge from this will be too distant to inform just choice. This is what Laura Valentini refers to as ‘the paradox of ideal theory’.²

The threat posed by these challenges is significant. If these concerns hold then long-term choice may cease to be a viable approach. If in turn, my concerns from the previous chapter about the viability of short-term choice in capitalist societies also hold, then the entire enterprise of just choice will be in jeopardy. Fortunately I believe that I can respond to these two challenges. First I will show that certain functions played by idealisations, far from conflicting with feasibility assessments, are actually necessary in order to perform thorough and robust feasibility assessments. Second I will show that there is no reason idealisations themselves cannot also be constrained by feasibility conditions, and if we do this then we can insure that the ideals we derive from these idealisations will be able to inform long-term choice.

In making these claims then I look to meet the fourth Key Objective of this thesis, by showing that one can arrive at feasible ideals while employing idealisations, and thus that just choice informing ideals do not rely on contradictory methods. I also look to buttress the third Key Objective by demonstrating that the challenges to long-term choice that are presented in this chapter do not hold and that it thus remains a viable approach to just choice.

The following section begins by defining the three key functions performed by idealisations, namely *abstraction*, *simplification*, and *normativity*. I look to show that these functions are necessary for a range of fundamental philosophical arguments (§ I). Following this I focus on the normative function in particular, addressing the paradox of ideal theory, and the three versions of the ‘informing critique’ that motivate it (§ II). I then look to respond to the most telling version of this critique, showing that idealisations, when properly conceptualised, can generate normatively accurate ideals

² Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory’, p. 333.

that are also feasible (§ III). I then consider and dismiss the claim that idealisations are naturally ideological (§ IV), before ending the chapter with some reflections on methodological perspectives more generally (§ V).

I. Idealisations and their Functions

As noted above, ‘idealisations’ refer to a particular type of assumption used in theorising. Specifically, idealisations are assumptions that conceptualise a given phenomenon, or set of phenomena, in a way that does not accurately represent the ‘real world’ form of the phenomenon or phenomena in question.³ To borrow Ingrid Robeyns helpful and succinct definition, idealisations are ‘assumptions that describe certain aspects of a theory differently from how they are in reality.’⁴ As noted above, it is the aim of this chapter to defend the use of idealisations in theories of justice. While I want to show that idealisations have many benefits and perform at least three important and necessary functions, what underpins all of these claims is the wider claim that idealisations are both useful and necessary because they help create theoretical spaces that allow one to pursue lines of inquiry one would not otherwise be able to.

While I want to defend idealisations in general, this chapter will give special attention to two idealisations, namely ‘strict compliance’ and ‘favourable conditions’. As we shall see in this section, these assumptions, theorised by John Rawls, are of particular importance to theories of justice. Strict compliance is the assumption that all people ‘act justly’ and contribute to ‘upholding just institutions.’⁵ It assumes that irrespective

³ Idealisations are frequently described as ‘false’, see for example Onora O’Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 40, and Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory’, p. 352. However I believe this term to be problematic for two reasons. The first is that it may be open to misinterpretation: ‘false’ can have connotations of both dishonesty and incompetence. Secondly, and more importantly, idealisations intentionally construct artificial conditions, and it seems potentially misleading to describe these conditions as ‘false’ for the same reason that it seems incorrect to describe (intentional) works of fiction as ‘false’.

⁴ Ingrid Robeyns, ‘Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice’ *Social Theory and Practice* Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 341-362 (2008), p. 352.

⁵ In the past the part of ideal theory concerned with strict compliance, i.e. ‘strict compliance theory’, has been used to refer to the enterprise as a whole. Michael Phillips for example, asserted that ‘what Rawls means by Ideal Theory is clear. Ideal Theory is what he calls “full compliance theory”’. See Michael Phillips, ‘Reflections on the Transition from Ideal to Non-Ideal Theory’ *Nous*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 551-570 (1985), p. 553. This assumption is unsurprising given that Rawls himself refers to ‘ideal,

of how compliant people in contemporary society might actually be to laws that adhere to a given ideal of justice, for the purpose of a particular theoretical endeavour one assumes them to be fully compliant. Strict compliance is thus evidently an idealisation, given its clearly non-representative conceptualisation of real world levels of compliance.

The second idealisation I wish to defend is the assumption of ‘favourable conditions’.⁶ This implies that irrespective of the actual condition of any particular society’s economic and institutional structures the model employed by the ideal theorist is of a society that has a sufficiently wealthy economy and sufficiently robust institutional structures as to be able to achieve and maintain ideals of justice. This is also an idealised assumption given the prevalence in the contemporary world of societies with unstable economies, high levels of poverty, or inefficient or corrupt social institutions that would prevent them from adhering to many conceptions of justice given the material prerequisites of those ideals.

While Rawls uses these idealisations to justify a liberal egalitarian ideal of justice I believe that these idealisations, or as we shall see in Section IV, at the very least *variations* of these idealisations, are necessary for the formulation of *any* ideal of justice.⁷ In what follows I want to define three important functions that idealisations perform, doing so with reference to the role of the strict compliance assumption and the favourable conditions assumption in ideal theories of justice.

Throughout this chapter I will also offer some discussion of a further group of idealised assumptions, namely those that make up Rawls’s original position argument. These are almost certainly the most widely discussed idealisations Rawls uses, and the original position argument has been the subject of extensive debate.⁸ However this

or strict compliance theory’. See John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 13. For more on Rawls’s reduction of ideal theory to strict compliance theory see Stemplowska and Swift, p. 2.

⁶ See John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 47. See also Simmons, p. 7.

⁷ For a summary of Rawls’s ideal conception of justice see Chapter 2, Section I, with a more detailed summary of the Difference Principle aspect of Rawls’s ideal discussed in Chapter 3, Section I. Recall also that the previous chapter suggested that Rawls’s ideal of justice, as with liberal ideals more generally, would fail to meet Marxist derived standards of feasibility (see Chapter 4, Section IV).

⁸ For a broad overview of the literature on this subject see, Samuel, Freeman, ‘Original Position’ *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2014). For a notable commentary on the original position argument see Ronald Dworkin, ‘The Original Position’ in *John Rawls: Critical*

discussion will remain largely focused on strict compliance and favourable conditions. As stated above, I intend to show why these assumptions are prerequisites for arriving at *any* ideals of justice. They are assumptions we have to make in order to proceed to the actual process of arriving at particular ideals. In other words they *make ideal theory possible*. The argument from the original position on the other hand is an example of ideal theory itself, i.e. the processes whereby we arrive at *particular* ideals. Thus while I want to say that all ideal theories have to work with idealised conceptions of compliance and objective conditions, I do not want to claim that all ideal theories must adhere to the specific methods of Rawls's original position. When the original position is discussed it is to illustrate certain more general claims about ideal theory, not necessarily as a defence of this particular method.

As we shall see, I believe that two of the functions that will be considered, namely the *abstracting* function and the *simplifying* function, are uncontroversial and ought to be accepted by all philosophers. In making this claim I want to show why any wholesale rejection of idealisations ought to be dismissed. In sharp contrast we shall see that the *normative* function is contentious. The remainder of the chapter will then focus on responding to various criticisms of normative idealisations and subsequent discussion will focus largely on ensuring that such idealisations can respond to the various serious criticisms that are levelled at them.

(1) The first function of idealisation I would like to consider is the *abstracting* function. I use 'abstracting' here to refer to the removal of a given thing from a particular context in order to assess and improve our understanding of that thing. To illustrate how this process works consider the Entitlement Ideal discussed in Chapter 3. Recall that this ideal states that a distribution of material goods and wealth is just providing it is arrived at through exclusively voluntary transactions and that, conversely, a distribution of material goods and wealth is unjust if it is arrived at through non-voluntary and coercive transactions. I suggested earlier that as state intervention in wealth distribution would be prohibited by this ideal, there may be valid

Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers, Vol. 1: Foundations and Methods, ed. by Chandran Kukathas (London: Routledge, 2003).

arguments that suggest that it would result in social problems that would make it unstable in practice.⁹

Another, possibly more immediate, argument against the Entitlement Ideal though is that its realisation is highly improbable. One can certainly claim that the emergence of any state that adhered to this ideal would be dramatically at odds with all current and historical states, none of which have adhered to its principles of formal liberty. The absence of such states may be attributed to one or more of the following, essentially compliance-based,¹⁰ reasons: that there is pressure exerted on government to provide material support to citizens; that those with political or economic power can influence legislation in their own favour; and that political actors tend to attempt to gain, rather than cede, power.¹¹ Whether or not one finds these arguments convincing let us assume for the sake of this discussion that there does exist at least one valid argument that should lead us to accept that the Entitlement Ideal is improbable.

In an important sense then, the analysis of the stability of a society that adheres to the Entitlement Ideal is ‘trumped’ by our analysis of such a society’s probability. By this I mean that as our prospective society is deemed highly improbable, it is pointless to ask questions relating to the working of such a society in practice. Despite this, we may still wish to assess the stability of this ideal, or indeed we may wish to assess the ideal according to standards established by a further category, such as desirability. Those more concerned with infeasible theories of justice for instance might want to know how desirable a given ideal is irrespective of its probability. However there are also sound reasons for wishing to make such assessments that are consistent with the feasible ideal theory approach that this thesis is more concerned with. Importantly such analyses provide a chance to make our assessments of ideals, ‘contingency-proof’, for example by knowing whether an ideal is worth pursuing if it emerges that our original

⁹ See Chapter 3, Section II.

¹⁰ They are ‘compliance-based reasons’ in the sense that in each case the obstacle that they identify as preventing the realisation of the Entitlement Ideal consists of people being insufficiently compliant.

¹¹ The purpose of this list is not to provide an exhaustive account of arguments against the probability of the Entitlement Ideal, nor even to provide a single convincing argument against it. Rather the goal here is to show how analysis in one category, in this case probability, may trump our analysis in another category, in this case stability.

probability assessment was incorrect. There are certainly plenty of ideals that, while improbable, are desirable or stable and so on.¹²

Irrespective of the rationale underpinning this though, we will not be able to logically pursue these lines of inquiry without first *abstracting* from the issue of compliance. It is only by consciously bracketing compliance problems, such as those listed above, that we are able to assess how an ideal performs in respect to other categories. The same rationale applies to idealised assumptions about objective conditions in society. It may be the case that we believe that the conditions required by a particular ideal of justice may be too difficult to achieve. However by bracketing this concern we are once again able to turn to other questions about the ideal.

What we see in both cases though is how the abstracting function of idealisations allows us to bracket certain obstacles to ideal realisation in order to create a theoretical space where other questions can be logically posed. I believe it is uncontroversial to say that idealisations of this sort are necessary for some of the most fundamental forms of philosophical argument. Without abstracting idealisations we are unable to make claims of the type, ‘Even if *C* were not *X* it would still be *Y*’; where a particular claim, *C*, is *X*, and where both *X* and *Y* are things that a claim ought not to be. For example, ‘Even if the Entitlement Ideal were not improbable it would still be unstable.’ Arguments of this sort are only logically possible if we make abstracting idealised assumptions.

The broader repercussions of this are worth noting. We noted in the introduction to this chapter that there can appear to be a tension between the factual and non-ideal basis of feasibility conditions and the non-factual basis of idealisation. Indeed one may assume that they are antitheses of each other, with the former concerned with introducing nonideal obstacles into ideal theory, and the latter concerned with bracketing those same phenomena. While, as we shall see below, this remains the case to an extent, we can see from the case of the abstraction function that idealisations are also necessary if one wants to conduct thorough and comprehensive feasibility

¹² For a discussion of the claim that that ideals can be desirable or stable or probable, without being either of the other two things (or indeed anything else) see Chapter 3, Section III. The more particular claim that such ideals exist is exemplified, depending on one’s political and ethical values, by either the Communist Ideal, (again, see Chapter 3, Section II) or the Entitlement Ideal itself.

assessments. It is only when we are able to bracket certain real world feasibility issues that we are, in turn, able to assess others. For example, by setting aside concerns about probability we can ask questions about stability.

In attributing such importance to the abstracting function it may seem that I am suggesting that without conscious acts of abstracting idealisation, one will be unable to make the various types of argument discussed above. I do not want to make this strong claim. Rather, the above arguments are so intuitive in their essential form and so fundamental to philosophical discussion that such idealisations will be performed in a far less conscious fashion. If they are used subconsciously this is in no way problematic. The purpose of illustrating the necessity of such idealisations for many philosophical arguments is to show that even those who are extremely critical of idealisation based approaches will, I think, almost invariably use abstracting idealisations in their arguments.

Before moving on to the second function of idealisation I would like to consider a significant potential criticism of abstracting idealisations. Some may object to the terminology I employ, arguing that it conflates two distinct concepts, namely ‘abstraction’ and ‘idealisation’, and reduces the former to a mere sub-category of the latter. Certainly there are good reasons for accepting that a conceptual distinction exists between abstractions and idealisations. Onora O’Neill for instance distinguishes between the two concepts, noting that where abstraction, involves ‘bracketing’ certain factors, idealisation involves ‘falsifying’ certain factors. In the case of abstraction we simply omit certain inputs from our theorising while with idealisation we knowingly misrepresent (at least some of) the inputs we use in our theorising. O’Neill goes on to use this distinction to try to argue in favour of the former method and against the latter one.¹³

¹³ See Onora O’Neill. *Toward Justice and Virtue*, pp. 40-41, and Onora O’Neill ‘Abstraction, Idealisation, and Ideology in Ethics’ *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series* Vol. 22, pp. 55-69 (1987). For a discussion of O’Neill’s modelling of abstraction and idealisation, see for example, Lisa H. Schwartzman, ‘Abstraction, Idealisation, and Oppression’ *Metaphilosophy* Vol. 37, No. 5, pp. 565-588 (2006) and Lisa H. Schwartzman, ‘Non-Ideal Theorising, Social Groups, and Knowledge of Oppression: A Response’ *Hypatia* Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 177-188 (2009).

However, while I believe that this is a conceptually sound distinction to make it may be one that is difficult to sustain in many practical contexts.¹⁴ Much of this scepticism hangs on the fact that it seems that even in merely bracketing particular variables from our theory we still create models of phenomena that are in an important sense ‘false’.¹⁵

The Marxist model of capitalism that we discussed in the previous chapter gives us a good example of this definitional difficulty and how apparent abstractions may be forms of idealisations. On one hand Marx’s model of capitalism can be understood as an abstraction, merely bracketing certain variables from economic theory, for example in excluding such factors as the roles of the state, ideologies, legal systems, cultural practices, and so on.¹⁶ However on the other hand one may suggest that this is necessarily an idealisation, as in removing these things the overall phenomena it aims to model, i.e. the trajectory of capitalist economies, is unquestionably an artificial and inaccurate representation of the phenomena as it functions in reality.¹⁷

The same appears to hold for abstractions used more directly in normative fields such as justice. Consider the examples above. Imagine that we reframe our assumption not as say ‘strict compliance’ but rather as the removal of compliance considerations altogether, thus making the method superficially more one of abstraction rather than idealisation. However the outcome is still the same, namely a social world that does not represent the one we actually live in.

This is not to suggest that genuine abstractions may not exist in other practical contexts. It may be the case that they hold in certain experiments in the natural sciences. However, irrespective of this, it seems that when employed in the fields of philosophy and social sciences that we are interested in, they are more accurately

¹⁴ This point is well made by Lawford-Smith when she states that ‘the distance between abstraction and idealisation seems flimsy at best.’ See Holly Lawford-Smith, ‘Debate: Ideal Theory – A Reply to Valentini’ *The Journal of Political Philosophy* Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 357-368 (2010), p. 366. Hamlin and Stemplowska also stress the difficulty in distinguishing between idealisation and abstraction, see Hamlin and Stemplowska, pp. 50-51.

¹⁵ This same point is made by Stemplowska who says that abstractions are false inasmuch as they are mere ‘approximations’ of reality. See Stemplowska, p. 327

¹⁶ See Chapter 4, Section 3. Note that most of the main proponents of approaches to Marxism that emphasise this method, for example, Ollman, Althusser, and Bhaskar, use the term ‘abstraction’ without any mention of idealisation.

¹⁷ As noted in the previous chapter this is by no means necessarily a criticism of either the Marxist model of capitalism, nor abstracting idealisations more generally.

defined as a form of idealisation. An outcome of this way of conceptualising abstractions is that it also highlights a fundamental similarity in the broad type of assumptions used in the explanatory theorising of Marxism and normative theorising about justice.¹⁸

(2) Having clarified this point on terminology we can turn now to consider a second function of idealisation, the *normative* function, which is related to, but distinct from, the abstracting function. Like abstracting idealisations, normative idealisations involve the bracketing of certain real world issues in order to ask questions we would not otherwise be able to. However where abstracting idealisation uses these theoretical conditions to make *assessments* of ideals, normative idealisations are necessary for actually generating the ideals themselves. The term ‘normative function’ is thus used as it is because of this function that we are able to produce normative theories of justice at all.

To illustrate why this is so consider the following case. Imagine an egalitarian philosopher who believes that justice will likely require an extensive redistribution of wealth. In order to arrive at a settled ideal of justice she looks to test what levels of redistribution might be demanded by her just society. Here she has two choices, she can either premise her theorising on non-idealised representations of compliance and objective conditions or on idealised representations of compliance and objective conditions. What happens if she chooses the former? If she does this then she confronts various real world obstacles to redistribution. On the objective condition-related side it may be that the society in question lacks the institutional structure required to enforce redistributive policies. On the compliance-related side it may be that attempts to increase taxation will lead to widespread tax evasion, tax avoidance, and capital flight, as the wealthy do whatever they can to avoid seeing their wealth depleted. If we want an ideal to be achievable and we use non-idealised conceptions of these categories then we would likely have to accept relatively low levels of redistribution, as this would reflect the ideal that contemporary society would be able to immediately support.

¹⁸ I do not intend to overstate the similarity here. Each approach is still asking very different questions, i.e. the former being concerned with explanatory and predictive models and the latter concerned with normative models. However the similarity is still worth stressing, particularly as a response to representations of Marxism as forming an entirely concrete, ideal-free method.

It is likely however that many would feel dissatisfied with this result. One might think that such an ideal would be, as Zofia Stemplowska says, ‘normatively inaccurate’. It is an ideal that underpins laws that people will adhere to anyway, rather than laws that they ought to adhere to, but at present may not.¹⁹ Intuitively, our conception of what a just society looks like ought to be more ambitious than this, not least because we can be confident that a proportion of the contemporary obstacles to more just societies, such as low levels of compliance and underdeveloped economic and institutional conditions, are ones that can be overcome. As Simmons rightly states we require idealisations because ‘the current state of our institutions [...] is so distant from what we can realistically hope to achieve.’²⁰ It is for this reason that the second choice is preferable. In working from idealised assumptions instead we can generate ideals that are not constrained by contemporary obstacles, and are thus appropriately ambitious and normatively accurate.

(3) While the abstracting function is necessary for thorough assessments of ideals and the normative function is necessary for the generation of those ideals, both are dependent on a third, arguably more fundamental, function, namely the *simplifying* function.²¹ This is the function that allows us to set aside complex, accurate representations of real world phenomena and instead employ simplified idealised representations of these phenomena. To illustrate why this is necessary, let us ask what would happen were we to reject the idealised version of strict compliance we advocated for use in abstracting idealisations and work instead with a non-idealised representation of compliance as it actually exists in the real world. In these circumstances we would have to consider a range of complex calculations about the different forms of noncompliance and the extent to which these different forms affect policy making across a wide range of variables. For example, we would need to determine the various ways in which different social groups might fail to comply with pieces of legislation. The exact same repercussions would occur if we decided to

¹⁹ Stemplowska, p. 333

²⁰ Simmons, pp. 31-32. Similarly, Hertzberg claims that ‘the ability to imagine politics functioning other than it currently does is foundational to the generation of new and the refinement of old political ideals’. See Benjamin R. Hertzberg, ‘Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory in Elizabeth Anderson’s *The Imperative of Integration*’ *Political Studies Review* Vol. 12, No. 12, pp. 369-375 (2014), p. 372.

²¹ For further discussion of the simplifying function of idealisation, see Simmons, pp. 8-9.

replace an idealised assumption of favourable conditions with a non-idealising model of actual conditions. Again we would have to fully model the complex reality and minutiae of economic and institutional conditions in a given society.

There are intuitive and compelling reasons to avoid using complex, rather than simple, representations of relevant phenomena when theorising ideals of justice. First there is the simple matter of time allocation. It is almost certainly the case that were we to try to understand a given process in its full complexity we would be unable to ever actually proceed to the question of ideals, as we would be trapped trying to arrive at a representation of a complex, real world process. For this reason, at least some form of simplification is required.

Second there is the issue of expertise. While philosophers *qua* philosophers are well suited to the analysis of abstract concepts and categories, they likely lack the training to engage with complex real world phenomena. The skills required to model such phenomena are more likely in the domain of the social and natural sciences as well as more concrete forms of explanatory or predictive social theory. Again, philosophers can avoid this if they are engaging with simplified, rather than complex, models.

Third there is the issue of the level of specificity of our ideals. Complex representations of reality necessarily have to be representations of actually existing, *specific* phenomena. By definition, any attempt to generalise these phenomena across time or space would be to simplify them. Even if we set aside the first and second concerns noted immediately above and assume that it would be feasible to create a fully non-idealised representation of a given society's actual levels of compliance and objective economic and institutional conditions, we would be doing this at the expense of any kind of generality. The ideals that would follow from such assumptions would be peculiar to the social and historical context of the case at hand, and likely not extendable to other societies and other times.²²

²² I do not wish to claim that ideals should be completely universal in their application. As I argued in the previous chapter, for ideals to meet feasibility conditions they ought to have strong synergy with particular social and historical contexts. However, an ideal that is completely wedded to a particular social and historical context, to the extent that it is only applicable at a precise time in a precise place is almost certainly *too* contextual.

Idealised assumptions on the other hand allow us to side step these concerns. First, in bracketing certain complex issues at the outset, ideal theorists need not get trapped in a potentially endless quest for a fully accurate representation of a given phenomenon. Second, this in turn means philosophers can be allowed to, for the most part, focus on abstract, conceptual analysis, rather than almost exclusively non-philosophical analysis. Third, in setting off from a non-socially and historically specific position the ideals generated would not be inextricably connected to a single society's levels of compliance or economic and institutional development from the outset.

Fundamentally, the simplifying function underpins the distinction between ideal theory and nonideal theory. Where nonideal theory is generally concerned with understanding the complexities of real world phenomena and injustices, ideal theory uses abstract concepts in order to arrive at normative ideals. In maintaining the division between ideal theory and nonideal theory, there is also a clearer division of labour between the different enterprises, and this should help ensure that better use is made of different expertise.²³

Simplifying idealisations are used as prerequisites for other types of idealisations. If idealisations were not simplified then they could not in turn be abstracting or normative, as these latter functions are themselves extensions of simplifications; which is to say that abstract and normative idealisations have to also be simplified if they are to perform these functions. Moreover, as we have seen, even if we were to set this concern to the side, ideal theory without simplification would likely be caught up in a series of endless inquiries into diverse, complex real world phenomena. In sum then we can think of simplifying idealisations as being a necessary *facilitator* of other functions of idealisations.

²³ Two points from this paragraph ought to be made clear. First, I am not suggesting that nonideal theory *never* uses simplifying idealisations; as I mentioned above, the pursuit of fully concrete representations of phenomena will often be prohibitively difficult and time consuming. However nonideal theory should use fewer and less extensive simplifications than ideal theory does. Second, I am not suggesting that ideal theory and nonideal theory exist completely independently from each other, with the former simply issuing ideals for the latter to try to put into practice. As we saw in the previous chapter that is categorically not the approach I take, rather I believe that ideal theory has to be informed by explanatory models and theories from the nonideal domain to ensure that ideals meet feasibility conditions. My point here then is that irrespective of the important contributions that nonideal considerations have to make to ideal theorising, the latter enterprise and its distinctive, abstract methods remain vital to the overall project of normative theories of justice.

Before concluding this section I would like to consider a possible fourth function that idealisations may perform that can be inferred from Ingrid Robeyns work on this subject. Robeyns suggests that idealisations can also be used to bracket things, which from an ethical perspective ‘should simply not occur.’²⁴ As an example she uses the cases of slavery and prejudice, suggesting that as we possess fundamental ethical arguments for why a just society should not premise institutions on either of these phenomena, we can exclude them from our ideal theorising. We can do this by working from the idealised assumption that slavery and prejudice simply do not exist.²⁵ Let us call this the *ethical* function of idealisation.

While I wholeheartedly concur with Robeyn’s claim that slavery and prejudice would not be a feature of just societies, I do not believe we should use idealisation to enforce this position. For one there seems no reason that a given ideal theory cannot engage with these issues directly, as opposed to bracketing them and excluding them from consideration. Rawls’s argument from the original position provides a clear illustration of what I mean. Rawls asks us to imagine an environment populated by individuals; who are behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ that makes them ignorant of their natural and social characteristics and abilities; who largely think and act in their own rational self-interest; and who have a full understanding of sociological, political, legal, and psychological processes. He claims that were we to ask these individuals to arrive at an ideal of justice they would include within that ideal a principle that ensured the maximum allocation of rights and liberties for each citizen, compatible with the same rights and liberties being enjoyed by other citizens. Rawls’s rationale is that as the individuals do not know their natural and social characteristics and abilities they would not select any ideal that might allow the rights of some to be reduced, such as those ideals that permit slavery or prejudice, lest they themselves, on having the veil of ignorance lifted, found themselves to be in a group that would be prone to enslavement or prejudicial treatment.²⁶ Whether or not one finds this particular argument convincing it does illustrate how the ideal theory process itself can generate arguments

²⁴ Robeyns, p. 354.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Ch. 3.

that reject injustices such as slavery and prejudice. It is thus not necessary to exclude them from consideration.

For this reason it seems unnecessary to use idealisations to deal with substantive ethical issues such as the excluding of particular injustices. Compelling ideal theories need to be able to do this through their own internal mechanisms and a failure to do so should raise serious questions about the validity of an ideal theory of justice. Idealisations should therefore be used primarily as methodological, rather than substantive, tools in order to create theoretical spaces where we are logically able to answer questions that, were we to work on real world, nonideal assumptions, we would otherwise not be able to.

The three functions I outlined above, namely those of abstraction, normativity, and simplification, are such methodological tools. In different ways they help create important, and sometimes necessary, theoretical spaces. However the functions they perform are also distinct from each other and achieve quite separate aims. Normative idealisations are assumptions we have to make in order to arrive at any normatively accurate ideals of justice. Without this function, we would have to premise ideals on contemporary nonideal standards. Abstracting idealisations on the other hand are not strictly necessary in order to generate ideals of justice, however, as we have seen, they are required if we wish to thoroughly assess given ideals according to standards derived from different categories. In essence then, where normative idealisations help us *formulate* ideals, abstracting idealisations help us *assess* ideals.

The simplifying function differs in type from the other two functions. Simplifying idealisations are used as prerequisites for other types of idealisations. For example, in employing a particular normative or abstracting idealised conception of compliance we also necessarily simplify. If a given idealisation did not perform a simplifying function it would not also be able to perform an abstracting or normative function. Simplifying idealisations thus help *facilitate* other idealisations.

We also saw how these three functions performed by idealisations can be embodied in the assumptions of both strict compliance and favourable conditions. As mentioned above I believe that idealised conceptualisations of compliance and objective

conditions are necessary in order to arrive at ideals of justice; a point that will be assessed at length in the following section. Given (a) the substantive criticisms of Rawlsian and liberal ideals that I offer in the previous chapter and (b) my interest in ideal theory as it pertains to Marxism and socialism, one may ask why I defend these assumptions. I believe the above discussion of the functions of idealisation goes some way to show why they are required for any ideal conception of justice. Without idealisations we will be unable to employ the simplified conceptions of real world phenomena that we need in order to engage in philosophical analysis, nor will we be able to make normative arguments as the assumptions from which our ideals are derived will be constrained by contemporary nonideal standards of compliance and objective conditions. Moreover, without the abstracting function of idealisations we will be unable to rigorously assess ideals from the perspective of various different categories.

As suggested above, the abstracting and simplifying functions of idealisations ought to be uncontroversial. Simplifying idealisations are a basic component of virtually all forms of analysis and certainly all forms of philosophical analysis. Similarly, abstracting idealisations are necessary for some of the most fundamental forms of philosophical argument. Importantly this includes any comprehensive approach to assessing the feasibility of ideals of justice. In discussing these I have intended to provide a more comprehensive account of the different functions that idealisations perform in theories of justice and their necessity for basic forms of philosophical analysis in general. From this latter point follows the fact that any attempts to criticise idealisation in general will surely fail.

Normative idealisations however are not similarly uncontroversial and serious questions can be asked about their validity. As noted above, normative idealisations are necessary if we wish to arrive at normatively accurate ideals to inform just choice. For this reason, any challenge to normative idealisations ought to be taken seriously. In particular I want to consider criticisms that threaten normatively idealised conceptions of compliance and objective conditions. However as we shall see, while I generally defend Rawls's idealisations I will also argue why his conceptualisation of compliance and objective conditions ought to be altered in order to satisfy feasibility

conditions, and in turn ensure that the ideals they lead to are able to inform long-term choice.

II. Normative Idealisations and the Informing Critique

The position then is as follows. Ideals are generally required to inform just choice, but we cannot formulate ideals without employing normative idealisations. The concern thus is that we may be unable to derive feasible ideals from idealisations because they are, by definition, not representative of the real world. Valentini refers to this conundrum as ‘the paradox of ideal theory’.²⁷ If this line of criticism is proven to be valid then not only will the method of idealisation be undermined but the ideals they lead to will be invalidated, and thus they will be unable to inform long-term just choice. For this reason, let us call this challenge the ‘informing critique’.²⁸

In order to assess the validity of the informing critique I would like to consider three variations of it, noted by Valentini. The three candidate versions of the informing critique provide a helpful structure for assessing the strength of several major objections to the normative function of idealisation. As we shall see, two of these versions can be responded to without significant difficulty, however the third version poses a more serious challenge and we will see that in responding to this it is necessary to reassess the kinds of idealisations we use when looking to generate feasible ideals.

(1) The first version of the informing critique is the claim that ideals ‘fail to motivate existing agents’ and therefore cannot inform just choice. Earlier we considered it a benefit of the normative function that it provided us with assumptions that were able to generate more normatively accurate ideals. This is to say that it is a strength of assumptions such as strict compliance and favourable conditions that they make extensive demands, which people may not be able to adhere to straight away. The concern embodied in this criticism however is that these idealisations, and indeed others, may lead to ideals that are simply *too* distant from the world as it is at present

²⁷ Laura Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory’, p. 333.

²⁸ Valentini uses the term ‘guidance critique’, however I have substituted this for ‘informing critique’ for the sake of terminological consistency with the rest of this thesis.

and that as such people may not feel any attachment to these ideals, nor be compelled to act in accordance with them.

A similar concern is raised by Katherine Eddy in her discussion of ideal conceptions of rights produced through idealised assumptions. She worries that in deriving rights from ideal assumptions we inevitably have rights for just societies that again may seem distant and beyond our reach. Once again, the worry here is that the motivational force of rights may be lost, and that the notion of ‘rights as urgent and pre-emptive moral claims [is] compromised.’²⁹

However, I believe that neither of these criticisms ultimately hold. First, in response to Eddy, we can stress that we need not operate with monolithic concepts of rights. Rather we can use a range of different types of rights at different levels of abstraction, some may impose duties that only hold in the immediate term, while others may stipulate duties that would only hold in ideal conditions. In short, having a conception of the rights we would expect to be enforced in ideal conditions need not mean we have to use this conception of rights in all of our nonideal decisions and practices *en route* to realising these ideal conditions.

It is likely also the case that there would be, and in some circumstances should be, a separation in the terminological frameworks employed by philosophers on the one hand and political actors on the other hand. The language of actual politics need not reflect the rarefied terminology employed by philosophers. Where philosophers may want to identify subtle conceptual distinctions between different categories of rights, rights as a rhetorical tool of politics can be couched in language that ensures that these rights always remain urgent.³⁰

Addressing the motivational concern more broadly, we ought to side with Valentini in rejecting this argument for the reasons we touched on in Section I. It is a strength of ideal theory that it generally formulates ideals that make demands that are not

²⁹ Eddy, ‘Against Ideal Rights’, p. 475.

³⁰ This distinction partially maps on to the ideal theory and nonideal theory distinction inasmuch as ideal theory will generally have more concern for identifying truths and nonideal theory will have more concern with representations. For an interesting discussion of when political theorists have a duty to tell lies, see Robert Jubb and A. Faik Kurtulmus, ‘No Country for Honest Men: Political Philosophers and Real Politics’ *Political Studies* Vol. 60, pp. 539-556 (2012).

necessarily acceptable to all immediately. This ties in to the core normative function of idealisations. If we did not bracket questions of compliance then we would be unable to arrive at any ideals that were not immediately acceptable. The price we pay for having normatively correct ideals is accepting that in the short term we may not have high levels of compliance to these ideals.³¹

Criticisms of this sort also make the common mistake of conflating ideal theory and nonideal theory. While ideal theory ought to generate ideals that meet feasibility conditions, these ideals need not meet these conditions immediately. Rather, it is the task of nonideal theory to implement ideals, and this is in part achieved by working to make people increasingly compliant to, and motivated by, the ideal in question.³²

(2) The second version of the informing critique is that ideals produced by idealisation are flawed on the grounds that ‘they are not *immediately* applicable to day-to-day political decisions.’³³ The thrust of this challenge is that ideals that are produced by idealisations will necessarily be too abstract or disconnected from reality to inform just choice, as we cannot directly put them to use in nonideal circumstances.

A variant of this criticism is offered by Elizabeth Anderson who claims that the nature of idealised assumptions mean that the ideals that they lead to prevent us from understanding and addressing nonideal injustices. Discussing race, Anderson complains that idealisations on this subject ‘do not define a standpoint from which to assess racially unjust societies’ and further, they are unable to provide ‘the conceptual framework needed to recognise and understand contemporary racial justice.’³⁴

On the face of it these appear to be serious challenges, undermining the practical value of ideals derived from idealisations. Despite this, as with the first version of the informing critique, this line of criticism can also be overcome. First, ideals need not be able to engage with nonideal injustices immediately and without any mediating

³¹ As Valentini notes, ‘the fact of actual non-compliance tells us nothing about the adequacy of the theory itself.’ See Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory’, p. 340.

³² The tendency for some critics of ideal theory to criticise it for failing to perform the functions that these critics see as in the domain of nonideal theory is noted by Stemplowska and Swift who state that ‘many realist criticisms of ideal theory simply overlook the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory, and end up criticising the former for not being the latter.’ See Stemplowska and Swift, p. 6.

³³ Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory’ p. 340.

³⁴ Anderson in Knight, p. 363.

processes. As Robeyns notes, ideals ‘cannot serve as principles for the nonideal world’ but rather have to first be ‘adapted or reinterpreted or further developed for the nonideal world.’³⁵ Similarly, Valentini argues that part of the necessary process of practical political thinking is taking more general ideas and exposing them to the relevant facts in order to derive meaningful guidance. It is not a failing of an ideal that it does not cover every single conceivable application in meticulous detail.³⁶

As with the first criticism then, the second criticism also overlooks the division of labour between ideal theory and nonideal theory. Once again, it is the role of nonideal theory to actually determine what is and what is not a just choice by applying ideals mediated by appropriate nonideal categories and theories. Even accepting that long-term ideals should meet feasibility conditions prior to being considered by nonideal theorists, it remains the case that ideals will not, and need not, be immediately applicable. We should not expect ideal theory to be a one stop shop for just choice, but rather one part of a much larger intellectual endeavour.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, ideal theory is fundamentally necessary in order for this nonideal project to proceed. Ideal theory establishes the ideals that are necessary to inform just choice. In order to arrive at ideals that are normatively accurate it is necessary to employ idealisations. Responding to Anderson then, it is only when we have an ideal conception of justice that we have a vantage point from which we can make informed just choices. Normative idealisations allow us to figure out, uncontroversially surely, that what justice demands is racial equality, amongst many other things, and from here we can set about trying to realise this through nonideal theorising. Ideal theory would only be problematic if it made us blind to racial injustice at the nonideal level, that is, the level where such injustices take place and where they have to be acknowledged, understood, and overcome in order to achieve justice.³⁷ Thus while ideal theory may not singlehandedly present us with ‘the conceptual framework needed to recognise and understand contemporary racial justice’, for this is largely a task of nonideal theory, ideal theory is nonetheless a

³⁵ Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory’, p. 355.

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 342-343.

³⁷ I will argue against this particular argument in Section IV below.

necessary component of this project by virtue of the fact that it *does* facilitate us with a ‘standpoint from which to assess racially unjust societies.’

(3) Having shown that the first and second variations of the informing critique can be responded to, we can now turn to the more serious challenge posed by the third variation. This is the claim that, as the idealised conditions on which ideals are premised cannot actually be achieved in the real world, the ideals themselves will by extension be inapplicable in the real world. Thus where the second version of the criticism suggested that ideals are ‘insufficient’ to inform just choice, as we necessarily require input from nonideal theory, this criticism goes further, suggesting that due to the idealised premises they are founded on, ideals simply cannot inform just choice. As Valentini says, ‘the problem is not that there is a gap to be bridged between ideal theory and nonideal circumstances; the problem is that the gap is *unbridgeable*.’³⁸

Valentini offers a helpful response to this challenge by seeking to demarcate ‘good idealisations’ from ‘bad idealisations’; with the former referring to those that lead to ideals that can inform just choice, and the latter leading to ideals that cannot inform just choice. ‘Good idealisations’ are those that are simply used to help model the proper conditions for determining an ideal of justice and these can be contrasted with ‘bad idealisations’ that additionally require that the unachievable conditions stipulated in the idealisation to be realised.³⁹

Valentini illustrates this with the example of the idealisations employed in Rawls’s original position hypothetical. As we saw in the previous section, Rawls uses the original position to ask what kind of ideal of justice would be selected by an individual who is defined by various idealised characteristics, namely: full rationality, a comprehensive understanding of sociological, economic, political, and psychological processes, and being placed behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ that prevents her from knowing her natural abilities and characteristics and social position. Rawls believes such conditions are appropriate as the veil of ignorance prevents bias from entering the process as each individual’s actual self-interest is hidden to them, while their

³⁸ Ibid., p. 342.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 353.

rationality and comprehensive understanding would allow them to arrive at logical ideals of justice.⁴⁰

Again, whether or not we consider the original position to be a valid method for generating ideals of justice I believe it is clear that the idealisations it involves are, by Valentini's standards, 'good'. The thoroughly idealised conditions of the original position exist only to model what are, according to Rawls, the best conditions for arriving at ideals of justice. In order to realise any ideal that we think would emerge from the conditions of the original position, whether Rawls's own or otherwise, we would never need to actually realise the idealisations it is premised on. In short the original position can be used to strengthen claims for particular ideals on the grounds that it is what unbiased, rational, and informed individuals would select, without claiming that one would have to be an unbiased, rational, and informed individual in order to arrive at, or appreciate, such an ideal.⁴¹

Valentini's 'good idealisations' are thus helpful in protecting idealisations that exclusively look to model ideal formulating conditions. However there is a concern that this model will raise serious questions about the essential idealisations identified in Section I, namely strict compliance and favourable conditions. As we have seen, these idealisations are used to escape from the confines of contemporary standards of compliance and objective conditions. It is only with these idealisations in place that we can then derive ideals that, while not holding now, *would* hold if the conditions stipulated in our idealisations held. In order to realise a given ideal then it is necessary that we realise the conditions from which that ideal is derived. However what if these are 'bad idealisations' that cannot be realised? If this was the case then our ideal would be infeasible and would be unable to inform long-term choice. The entire approach defended in this thesis would be jeopardised.

Does this criticism apply to the assumption of favourable conditions? On the face of it, it appears that it may not, and that favourable conditions might actually constitute

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 338.

⁴¹ This point is made well by Lawford-Smith who stresses that 'asserting the truth of [a] counterfactual conditional' (such as those employed in the original position hypothetical) is not equivalent to saying that that counterfactual's 'antecedent' is true, i.e. claiming that people actually are unbiased, informed, and rational. See Lawford-Smith, 'Ideal Theory – A Reply to Valentini', p. 63.

an example of a ‘good idealisation’. Favourable conditions remain conditions for societies within the circumstances of justice, and as such they are defined by moderate scarcity and imperfect rationality. By the same token, favourable conditions conversely cannot assume material abundance nor all-knowing and perfectly efficient and rational public institutions. If we made these assumptions we would no longer be theorising an ideal of justice but rather an ideal for a society that has transcended justice.⁴² Moreover, favourable conditions currently exist in certain states, in that those states have both the requisite level of institutional and economic development required to realise, at least some, ideals of justice.

It is far less clear, however, that this is also the case for strict compliance. Even setting aside our assumption that societies in the future can be made, through nonideal intervention, *more* compliant to particular ideals of justice, we may still doubt that we can ever achieve *strict* compliance. As such we might worry that as strict compliance may not be realisable, the ideals that are premised on it will be invalid. For this reason the following section will mainly focus on strict compliance, though as we shall see, the lessons that can be learnt from how we conceptualise compliance in light of the informing critique are also pertinent to how we conceptualise objective conditions.

III. Responding to the Informing Critique

The third version of the informing critique as applied to strict compliance thus proceeds as follows. In order to arrive at ideals of justice we have to assume strict compliance, because without this normative idealisation our ideals would reflect and reify existing standards of compliance and would, in being too permissive and unambitious, be normatively incorrect. However it is also very likely that strict compliance is infeasible and thus, as we cannot realise the conditions stipulated in the normative assumption the ideal is derived from, the ideal will in turn also be infeasible.⁴³

⁴² See Chapter 3, Section III.

⁴³ The infeasible character of strict compliance is stated in particularly forthright terms by Uberti who claims that people would have to be ‘brainwash[ed]’ in order to achieve strict compliance. See Uberti, pp. 224-225.

The particular problem is that if we assume that *all* people will comply with *every* law that adheres to a given ideal of justice then we will almost certainly be overstating what even the most loyal and willing populace might adhere to. As such, ideals that are derived from strict compliance may make demands that will be too demanding for societies defined by *any* form of partial compliance. For this reason Schmidtz warns against ‘solving an ideal problem rather than a real one’.⁴⁴

A second variation of this criticism is presented by Colin Farrelly. Farrelly’s concern engages specifically with Rawls’s use of strict compliance though, as we shall see, it does have a more general application as well. At the heart of Farrelly’s objection to strict compliance is how it necessarily overlooks the material costs of different ideals and thus risks advocating ideals that are impracticable for a number of reasons.⁴⁵

Farrelly notes how in conditions of strict compliance, so-called ‘negative rights’ such as the right to security are *cost-free*. This is because without people who do not comply with laws and violate the rights of others it is unnecessary to provide institutions such as police forces and law courts to ensure that people are protected from those who violate rights. However in real world conditions of partial compliance this is not the case as people do violate these rights and thus it is necessary to provide these institutions.

The costs of negative rights have been convincingly theorised by Henry Shue. Shue notes that in order for any right to be ‘socially guaranteed’, that is protected in the face of noncompliance, corresponding duties have to be positive as well as negative. In other words as not all people will uphold their negative duty not to violate the rights of others, the state has to fund and organise institutions, i.e. uphold a *positive* duty of provision, which exists to defend these rights. For example if we wish to protect the right to security, then in any conditions of partial compliance, it will not be sufficient to only have a negative duty not to deprive others of their right to security, it will also be necessary to uphold a positive duty through social institutions that act to minimise abrogations of negative duties and to compensate those whose rights are violated. As

⁴⁴ David Schmidtz, ‘Nonideal Theory: What It is and What It Needs to be’ *Ethics* Vol. 121, No. 4, pp. 772-796 (2011), p. 781.

⁴⁵ Farrelly, p. 845.

such, in order to socially guarantee a right to security the state has the correlative positive duty to provide police forces, law courts, prisons and compensatory bodies to assist victims; all of which have to be trained and equipped to an appropriate standard.⁴⁶

One of Farrelly's main goals is to use the above insights to re-evaluate the validity of Rawls's 'lexical ordering' of his principles of justice, along with Rawls's claim that representatives in the original position would select his ideal of justice ahead of utilitarianism.⁴⁷ Given the specificity of this argument though I would like to focus on the broader claims being made here, and what this means for strict compliance. The Shueian perspective that Farrelly offers seems to bring into relief a significant problem with this normative idealisation. Farrelly's point is not the more obvious concern stated above, that ideals derived from strict compliance may be excessively demanding, but the more nuanced observation that, beyond this, they may also be impracticable, due to strict compliance's bracketing of costs. Knowing the practicability of an ideal in conditions of strict compliance may be unhelpful, and potentially misleading, when we look to determine that ideal's practicability in conditions of partial compliance.

In order to respond to these serious challenges there have to be changes in the way in which compliance idealisations are conceptualised. It is necessary that the assumption still performs the normative function while also ensuring that ideals that are derived from it are feasible. In order for this to be the case the level of compliance embodied in the assumption must be neither an infeasible strict compliance nor a simple reflection of current levels of compliance. What is required thus is *feasible ideal compliance*, or for brevity's sake simply *feasible compliance*. By this I mean a conception of compliance that is not representative of contemporary conditions but is

⁴⁶ Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and US Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 51-55.

⁴⁷ I am also inclined to think that Farrelly's criticism of Rawls is ultimately misguided. The essence of the former's criticism is that as the Liberty Principle has to be fully achieved before the second principle can be enacted, societies would be forever trying to implement the Liberty Principle, and would never proceed to implement the second principle. As such, he claims utilitarianism, with its capacity to weigh up the costs and benefits of different options would be better placed to satisfy the maximin criteria. However while Rawls does suggest that in ideal conditions the first principle is to take priority over the second principle he says that this only holds other things being equal in nonideal circumstances. This is to say that he acknowledges that it may be necessary to prioritise some economic development over some increases in individual liberty. See, respectively, Farrelly, pp. 849-850, and Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 217.

still feasible. However it is clear that while feasible compliance is to be an achievable alternative to strict compliance, it remains an idealised concept by virtue of the fact that it does not represent society at present. As such it is able to perform the normative function that strict compliance traditionally does, while avoiding the paradox stated above.

Feasible compliance thus avoids the first criticism we saw of strict compliance by ensuring that it is an idealisation that can be achieved. Just as long-term choice works with ideals as goals, so feasible compliance functions as a goal for nonideal theory to work towards as a means to realising the feasible ideal itself. This is to say that it presents nonideal theory with a *feasible* target to work towards, as it attempts to alter existing levels of compliance in order to make them conducive to the desired ideal. As the idealisation itself is feasible, then the ideals that are derived from it will, all other things being equal, be feasible as well.

Feasible compliance also avoids the second criticism of strict compliance by deriving ideals from an improved, but still partial, conceptualisation of compliance. Irrespective of the particular levels of compliance assumed by a given conception, anything short of strict compliance has to be sensitive to the fact that all ideals will have at least some implementation and enforcement costs, for example in the form of the positive duty-upholding public institutions considered above. One thus cannot simply assume away costs, in the fashion that is possible in conditions of strict compliance.

Feasible compliance brings the feasibility categories discussed in the third and fourth chapters to the fore of our conceptualisation of idealisation. In order to determine whether a particular idealised conception of compliance is or is not feasible, we will have to assess the possibility, probability, and stability of our conception. As with all feasibility assessments, determining what feasible compliance amounts to will be a far from exact science. However while we cannot expect to know *precisely* what feasible compliance consists of it need not be a purely speculative enterprise. As with other feasibility assessments it will be necessary to build on explanatory social and historical

approaches as well as social scientific research,⁴⁸ to help arrive at a conception of feasible compliance that we can have some confidence in.

It has rightly been noted how different ideals will confront different compliance problems.⁴⁹ Each ideal will make unique demands of particular groups of people. Libertarian ideals may make greater demands on those with lower capacities for earning, while egalitarian ideals will make greater demands on those with higher capacities for earning. Despite the truth of this position, I do not believe it is necessary for those engaging in ideal theory to formulate unique models of compliance for different ideals. Rather, all that is required at the level of ideal theory is that the conceptualisation of compliance is feasible in a broad sense. The task of identifying the particular compliance issues that will confront nonideal theorists as they attempt to achieve this broad level of compliance is a problem for this latter discipline.

As noted above, the assumption of favourable conditions does not have the inherent feasibility issues that are apparent in strict compliance. However the same principles that underpin the move from strict compliance to feasible compliance, and in turn indicate how we ought to arrive at conceptions of feasible compliance, also apply to how we conceptualise objective conditions. We should always aim to ensure that our conception of favourable conditions is also feasible. While we have already seen how objective conditions are inherently more constrained by the demands of the circumstances of justice, it is likely the case that we can imagine objective conditions that, while within the circumstances of justice, may be infeasible.

In arriving at a robust conception of feasible conditions it will be necessary to consider some of the same social scientific and theoretical inputs we would when trying to determine feasible compliance. However in addition to this, theorising objective conditions will likely involve significant input from natural sciences and engineering as we determine important considerations relating to pollutants and energy usage. These perspectives will also allow us to assess the feasibility of potential technologies that may emerge as well as the affects these may have on productivity. Evidently these

⁴⁸ For a discussion of this see Chapter 4, Sections II and III.

⁴⁹ Schmidtz makes this point, noting that the ‘task of choosing a principle we can live with is a task of choosing a compliance problem we can live with.’ See Schmidtz, p. 778.

factors will have a major impact on whether certain levels of production will be ecologically sustainable, and thus in turn stable and probable.

Before summarising our discussion in this section it is useful to consider the broader claims being made about theories of justice here. In particular, reconceptualising the normative idealisations of compliance and objective conditions in terms of their feasibility has some repercussions for how we think about the relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory. Rawls appears to suggest that ideal theory works from assumptions of strict compliance and favourable conditions while nonideal theory works from assumptions of partial compliance and nonideal conditions.⁵⁰ However we have seen that unless we ensure that these idealisations are also feasible, then they will be unable to produce ideals that can inform long-term choice.

It may be better then to understand the various conceptualisations of compliance and objective conditions as resting on respective spectra. For instance in the former case we can imagine the formally possible but highly improbable conceptualisations of full non-compliance and strict compliance as each resting on one of the poles of the spectrum. Somewhere between these points will be attempts to model contemporary real world levels of compliance, as well as attempts to model possible future levels of compliance. The role of ideal theory, inasmuch as it aims to generate normatively accurate and justice informing ideals, is thus not to use strict compliance but rather to use a conceptualisation of compliance that is appropriately ambitious while also being feasible.⁵¹ One of the key roles of nonideal theory on the other hand is to attempt to reform actual compliance until it has met the level of feasible compliance employed by the ideal theory that is informing just choice.⁵²

⁵⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 216.

⁵¹ There will of course be some debate about how to settle conflicts between feasibility and desirability. For example, should we favour a less feasible but more desirable idealisation, i.e. one that is closer to strict compliance, over an idealisation that is more feasible but less desirable? This is a difficult question, and while it will be of some benefit to always ensure that standards of reasonable feasibility should be met, which will exclude highly desirable but highly infeasible idealisations, disagreements will still occur between the merits of feasible options. My own intuitive position on this is that, in keeping with the generally conservative position that has been prevalent throughout this thesis, it is better to favour the option that is more feasible but less desirable.

⁵² In these circumstances we can imagine that we may discover that our earlier modelling of feasible compliance was either too optimistic or too pessimistic. In these circumstances the ideal that was derived from this idealisation should be re-assessed, and if it proves incompatible with the new level of feasible compliance then the ideal should be either altered to fit with this or, in more serious

Similarly, conceptions of objective conditions can be placed on a spectrum running from completely unfavourable conditions on one hand to perfect conditions on the other. The former would refer to a hypothetical world devoid of any resources whatsoever and lacking any institutional structure,⁵³ while the latter would have limitless resources and perfectly functioning institutions. We can perhaps think of the circumstances of justice as falling within this spectrum, though not necessarily being close to either pole. Once again, we can make a distinction between sufficiently favourable conditions and insufficiently favourable conditions, with ideal theory employing the former to arrive at ideals of justice and nonideal theory working within the latter to ensure that society moves towards, or remains within, conditions of sufficient favourability.

Compliance and objective conditions are therefore matters of degrees and the focus of both ideal theory and nonideal theory will shift with different conceptualisations of both idealised and nonideal conceptions of these categories. However this spectrum-based approach is consistent with a more categorical one as well, and we can retain a clear distinction between ideal theory and nonideal theory despite the fact that the assumptions used by both enterprises will often shift. It is always the case that ideal theory operates with the best available idealisations of feasible compliance and feasible conditions while nonideal theory will use less idealised conceptions of compliance and objective conditions in order to realise the standards that are used by ideal theory.⁵⁴

We began this chapter by noting the tension between the factual considerations of feasibility conditions and the non-factual considerations involved in idealisations. As we have seen here, assumptions can be both feasible and idealised, and thus still able to perform the necessary normative functions that allow us to arrive at normatively accurate ideals of justice, which are, by extension, able to inform long-term choice. Indeed feasibility and idealisation have strong synergy, with the former ensuring that

circumstances, replaced with a new ideal that is derived from the new conception of feasible compliance.

⁵³ Technically, *completely* unfavourable conditions should perhaps refer to some form of absolute nothingness existing outside of time and space.

⁵⁴ The spectrum approach is also raised by Hamlin and Stemplowska, although they reject a categorical understanding of ideal and nonideal theory. See Hamlin and Stemplowska, p. 50.

the latter remains relevant to just choice, and the latter ensuring that ideals remain normatively accurate.

While this section has sought to respond to the informing critique and defend a feasible alternative to strict compliance, and to a less urgent degree, favourable conditions, the conclusions reached here should not be automatically extended to idealisations more generally. While normative idealisations ought to be feasible if we wish to arrive at long-term ideals, this is not the case for the abstracting idealisations we discussed in Section I. Indeed, as we are not required to actually achieve the conditions stipulated in abstracting idealisations, it is simpler to use the infeasible idealisations of strict compliance and favourable conditions.

IV. The Ideology Critique

In the previous section we addressed the concern that in two ways, normative idealisations, if not properly constrained, will lead to ideals that are infeasible. One aspect of the criticism motivating this challenge was the claim embodied in Anderson's objection that ideals derived from idealisations cannot contribute to our understanding of nonideal injustices. My response to this was to argue that idealisations are necessary if we are to arrive at the ideals that we require to make judgements about the justness of nonideal phenomena.

There is however a further, related, and somewhat stronger version of this line of criticism that I would like to turn to now. This states that idealisations actively *detract from* and *damage* our understanding of nonideal problems. The most notable proponent of this position is Charles W. Mills whose criticism looks at how idealisations do not only idealise away from real world injustices, but that in doing this they '[distort] our perceptions and conceptions of the social order.' In short, idealisations actively harm our conceptualisations of nonideal phenomena, particularly in obscuring and misrepresenting the oppression of disempowered groups.⁵⁵ Given the negative impact Mills attributes to idealisation he questions how it can be in 'the

⁵⁵ Mills, pp. 168-169.

interests of women to ignore female subordination', or how it can be in the interests of the working class, the poor, or non-whites to each ignore the real world forms of subordination they are subject to.⁵⁶

As noted above, we have already discussed at some length why normative idealisations are necessary for those wishing to make just choices in the nonideal world. However I would like to set this fact aside temporarily in order to address the distinctive aspect of Mills's criticism, namely that idealisations distort our understanding of the real world. This criticism ought to be taken seriously, as it is possible that idealisation could be both necessary for the generation of ideals while also necessarily to the detriment of our understanding of real world injustices. If this is the case then we may find that theories of justice are in a near catch-22 where the only means of arriving at ideals to inform just choice is through a method that simultaneously damages our ability to make just choices.⁵⁷ Moreover, the severity of Mills criticism is amplified by the fact that it does not only apply to feasible ideals used for long-term choice but also infeasible ideals used for short-term choice. This is because his criticism is not primarily that the ideals that idealisations lead to are deficient but that the act of idealising itself distorts our understanding of the world around us. Thankfully I believe that we can show that this claim does not hold.

Given all of the weaknesses Mills attributes to idealisation, he rejects the idea that there could be any benefit in idealised assumptions, and asks why, given its apparently evident shortcomings, particularly its disregarding of real world oppression, it is deemed by any to be the correct means of conducting philosophical ethics.⁵⁸ For Mills the mainstream status of this method is due to its 'ideological' character.⁵⁹ By ideology, Mills means 'a distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the non-representative interests and experiences of a small minority of the

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 172. Ingrid Robeyns makes a related point in her discussion about how idealisations may be biased against people with disabilities, overlooking the particular injustices that they suffer. See Robeyns, p. 359.

⁵⁷ Ryan Gunderson summarises this claim well when he remarks that idealisation 'make[s] it impossible to understand how injustice works in reality, and thus impossible to actually achieve justice.' See Ryan Gunderson, 'A Defence of the "Grand Hotel Abyss": The Frankfurt School's Nonideal Theory' *Acta Sociologica* Vol. 58, No. 1, pp. 25-38 (2014), p. 35.

⁵⁸ Mills, pp. 171-172.

⁵⁹ A version of the ideological charge is also discussed by Valentini, who believes that certain 'bad idealisations' may be guilty of this. See Valentini, 'On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory', p. 348.

national population'.⁶⁰ In particular, idealisation's popularity in Anglophonic ethics is due to the parallel overrepresentation of 'middle-to-upper-class-white-males' within academic philosophy. Given the relative privilege of this demographic, and their relative lack of personal exposure to various oppressive social forces that members of other groups disproportionately bear the brunt of, Mills believes it is unsurprising that ideal approaches to philosophy are so 'dominant'. Without experience of these real injustices, it is far easier for philosophers to overlook them in their theorising.⁶¹

In response to this charge we can first note that Mills quite clearly appears to be misrepresenting idealisation. As we have seen, normative idealisations are not a product of a lack of knowledge or understanding of nonideal phenomena but rather a conscious bracketing of these for clear methodological reasons. These reasons being in essence that such idealisations are the only means through which we can achieve the requisite distance from contemporary nonideal obstacles to allow us to know what actual justice demands. If the exploitation and oppression of particular groups are not considered by ideal theory it is not because ideal theorists are generally not members of these groups but due to methodological necessity. As we have noted elsewhere in this chapter, consideration of the specific forms that real world injustices take is the preserve of nonideal theory. Mills, it seems, falls into the common trap of assuming that ideal theory is a standalone enterprise that fails to address nonideal issues, when in reality it is one part of a joint theoretical process with nonideal theory. There is thus no reason that the same theorists who bracket various real world injustices in order to arrive at ideals would not also argue that robust analysis of these bracketed issues ought to be conducted at the level of nonideal theory. Indeed in some cases the same theorists may perform this work themselves in their capacity as nonideal theorists.

In assessing the validity of idealised assumptions then it is not sufficient to simply ask '*cui bono?*',⁶² as the answer to this is not that 'it is obvious that [idealisation] can only

⁶⁰ Mills's definition of ideology is thus slightly different from the Marxist sense of ideology discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

⁶¹ See Mills, pp. 171-172. Mills does not seek to blame this demographic, as he notes that the dominance of idealised methods is not an intentional ploy by white, male, middle class philosophers but rather an honest mistaken generalisation of their own privilege and the result of structural social forces that may reward certain approaches over others. See Mills, p. 174.

⁶² 'To whose benefit?'

serve the interests of the privileged.’⁶³ Rather, we have no grounds to assume that idealisations are inherently biased in favour of, or against, certain groups based on their social power. Instead, these assumptions perform a necessary methodological role and work in tandem with more concrete, nonideal theory, which does engage with the injustices ideal theory necessarily idealises away from.

Indeed as we have seen, we can argue that normative idealisations are required in order to arrive at a position from where we can robustly critique injustices. We do not only see this in the perspectives afforded by idealised conceptions of compliance and objective conditions but also in the idealisations that are employed in the methods of specific forms of ideal theory. Once again, the original position argument demonstrates how idealisations can underpin an ideal that would, through extensive redistribution of wealth and guarantees of equality of liberties and opportunities, significantly decrease the relative social power of the white, middle class, male demographic of which Rawls himself was a part. Again, Rawls arrives at this ideal of justice only by setting aside consideration of actual injustices, through normative idealisations.⁶⁴ This point is well made by Alex Callinicos who stresses that ‘it is its very remoteness from what counts as feasible in the debased currency of contemporary liberal-democratic politics’ that makes Rawls’s ideal of justice so bold.⁶⁵ In an important sense then, the (relative) radicalism of Rawls’s ideal of justice is not achieved in spite of his use of idealisation, but rather because of it.⁶⁶

This is not to say that all ideal conceptions of justice will necessarily provide adequate responses to historical injustices or defend the rights and interests of oppressed groups. Nor does it suggest that where such inadequacies do occur that the biases and various social privileges of philosophers may not be a significant factor in contributing to this lacuna. Nor, finally, and by extension, is this to suggest that issues of diversity in

⁶³ Mills, p. 172.

⁶⁴ Countering this position others have suggested that Rawls’s political theory *is* ideological. Willis H. Truitt for example places Rawls in a group of thinkers whose work ‘served, at least partly, as apologies for the social systems within the context of which they were written.’ See Willis. H. Truitt, *Marxist Ethics: A Short Exposition* (New York: International Publishers, 2005), p. 41.

⁶⁵ See Callinicos, *The Resources of Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), pp. 221-222.

⁶⁶ In saying this I do not want to cast doubt on my criticisms of liberal egalitarianism from the previous chapter. Recall that my objections there were not to the ideals of liberal egalitarianism *per se* but the belief that they could be feasible within a capitalist economy.

contemporary philosophy ought not to be taken seriously. These are all important points that should not be glossed over. However, the pertinent point in responding to Mills's criticism is that the problem at hand here is not the use of idealisation. It is not that idealisation is inherently ideological, or merely a faulty method only used due to the myopic perspective of the privileged minority who hold the most power in philosophy departments. Rather, if idealisations do function in this way it is due to their *misuse*, something that genuinely could be caused by the overrepresentation of members of powerful, minority demographics in academic philosophy. Either way, where ideals are inadequate in some sense then this is due not to the use of idealisations in general but to the particular type of idealisation which that ideal is derived from.

Mills's solution to the problems he identifies with ideal theory is to stress the benefits of various forms of nonideal theorising. He correctly notes that nonideal theory is required if we wish to realise ideals, as it is able to identify and assess obstacles to ideal realisation. Similarly, he is right to state that nonideal theories are useful for considering the role of power and social structures in underpinning the prevalence of moral beliefs. He also contrasts such nonideal approaches with ideal theory, which he depicts as ignoring these issues and assuming that improving society 'is just a matter of coming up with better arguments.'⁶⁷

Four points can be made in response to Mills. First, as we have seen throughout this chapter, ideal theory is not an alternative to nonideal theory and there is no reason, and certainly none that Mills outlines, why we cannot do both. Indeed as we have seen here and in Chapter 2, we require ideals in order to do make just choices in nonideal theory, and it is only when we have considered nonideal theories and factors, that we can arrive at feasible conceptions of ideals to inform such choices. Second, while ideal theory does focus on moral arguments it need not, as I have shown here and in Chapters 3 and 4, do this without consideration of any other inputs. Rather I have defended the claim that ideal theory should generally concern itself with ideals that are possible, sufficiently probable, and stable. Third, related to the first and second points, a focus on moral arguments need not entail accepting that debates about ideals are the only or even the most important focus of research or debate. We can defend the position that

⁶⁷ Mills, p. 182.

ideal theories of justice are important without suggesting that they are the most important type of work that can be done in this area. Finally, as Simmons notes, idealisation can also be useful as a means of problematising social power. In imagining worlds that are far better than our contemporary one, we can denaturalise some of the currently dominant power structures, and consider what a society without them would be like.⁶⁸

V. On Methodological Perspectives

Before concluding this chapter I would like to address a final point related to the previous section's discussion of the ideology critique. In making this criticism, Mills raises a broader point about questions of approach in philosophy. He begins by making the, somewhat ironic, claim that if one were to assume away one's experience of philosophy and consider idealisation without any prior knowledge, one would be incredulous, asking, as Mills says, 'How in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics?'⁶⁹ For Mills, this position would not demonstrate the 'naïve[ty]' of the hypothetical layperson but would rather be the appropriate response to a deficient method. As we know, in Mills's mind ideals that inform just choice cannot be derived from idealisations.⁷⁰

A similar perspective is hinted at by Jack Knight, who stresses how ideal theory is 'grounded in a faulty conception of how we really think about moral and ethical questions.'⁷¹ Ideal theory is problematic in that it tries to engage with ethical questions in an objective and comprehensive fashion when in reality people tend to 'think about

⁶⁸ As Simmons rightly puts it, if we distance ourselves from certain nonideal factors then 'many of the facts about the nonideal world we currently inhabit could cease to *be* facts.' See Simmons, p. 32. In this sense, idealisations can perform a 'critical theory' role, which not only solves problems on established terms but questions the terms themselves. For a discussion of 'problem solving theory' and 'critical theory' see Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory' *Millennium Journal of International Studies* Vol.10, No. 2, pp. 126-155 (1981), pp. 128-130.

⁶⁹ Mills, p. 170.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Knight, pp. 361-362.

issues of justice [when they] are confronted by a problem to which [they] are uncertain how to respond.⁷²

An interesting theme can be inferred from both Knight's and Mills's remarks. This is the suggestion that philosophical ethics ought to reflect, or at least be more responsive to, day-to-day or lay approaches to ethics. The claim that people generally take a more subjective and contextual approach to ethics certainly has, at the very least, an intuitive plausibility. I think people probably do, in general, address questions of justice when they are confronted by injustices in their lives, and the solutions they offer will probably be relatively short-term (in a non-technical sense). Conversely it seems far-fetched to expect all people to hold robustly reasoned and comprehensive theories of justice, which they then adapt to the particular contexts they find themselves in.

There are two broad points I would make in response to any claim that this represents a preferable approach to ethics. First, as we discussed in Chapter 2, by virtue of the fact that we are able to express a preference for one nonideal option over another nonideal option we must have some abstract, untheorised conception of what ideal justice is. The option then is not either to use ideals or not to use ideals but rather to theorise ideals properly or not to theorise them properly.

Second, we should be sceptical that practices in academic ethics ought to mirror or at the very least set out from practices in lay ethics. For one, why should academic ethics be confined by ethical perceptions outside of academia? Accepting this approach would lead to an ethics that, rather than being proactive in looking to develop moral theory, would be reactionary in only responding to existing concerns and then doing so in a narrow and contextual manner. Secondly, such an approach overlooks the social division of labour where we can expect that different types of expertise are held by different professions, and that, in turn, members of a given profession should be expected to provide keener insight on their area of expertise than non-members of that profession should be. While it is a fact that all people will have opinions on ethical questions,⁷³ and there is a compelling normative claim that such sensibilities ought to

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ As Gramsci remarks, 'all men are philosophers'. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 323.

be cultivated, this does not preclude those who focus on this area being able to provide special insight.

Thirdly, this contrasts with the intuitive attitudes we would expect people to have towards other forms of expertise. It would be ridiculous to expect a mechanic to repair a car, a medical doctor to treat a patient, or a barber to cut hair, in a manner more similar to somebody who does not possess their specialised training. The example of the natural sciences is perhaps yet more instructive. Scientific progress often relies on the use of abstracting idealisations in the form of experiments in laboratory conditions. These allow scientists to isolate particular processes to study them independently from potentially disruptive variables. Were science to be confined to the simple observations of non-specialists then many of history's scientific breakthroughs would not have occurred. Normative idealisations in theories of justice function in a similar way, allowing us to reach conclusions that would not be possible were we to adopt a more intuitive, contextual, and subjective approach.

Finally, an approach that draws on both ideal theory and nonideal theory need not be insensitive to the lay approach. Indeed, considering how to exploit or adapt existing mainstream, popular attitudes to ethics will be an important aspect of nonideal theories attempts to shift levels of compliance towards the level required by a given ideal of justice. However, this understanding ought to be drawn on and engaged with rather than adopted as an example of good practice in philosophical ethics.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to clarify the definitive method used in ideal theorising: idealisation. As we have seen, idealisations are intentionally employed, non-representative conceptualisations of real world phenomena. These are used to create theoretical spaces that allow one to pose questions one would not otherwise be able to. My defence of this method anticipated two significant concerns. The first was that the non-factualism of idealisation may conflict with the factual focus of the feasibility-based approach to ideals defended in Chapters 3 and 4. The second was that

idealisations, in moving away from nonideal facts, may necessarily lead to ideals that would be unable to inform long-term just choice.

In responding to these I first discussed how idealisations are a necessary part of various fundamental philosophical processes. Importantly, the feasibility assessments discussed earlier in this thesis can be shown to depend on the abstracting function that idealisations perform. I then turned to the more controversial, normative function, of idealisation. While it had been demonstrated why such idealisations were necessary if we wished to arrive at normatively accurate ideals that did not simply reflect existing conditions, the concern was that this normative ambition may come at the price of feasibility. Fortunately it was demonstrated that this is not the case. Idealisations ought to adhere to the same feasibility conditions that ideals do more broadly, and indeed assessing the feasibility of idealisations may be a significant part of this wider process. The result of this is that when performing normative idealising functions, those wishing to formulate long-term, feasible ideals ought to replace conventional Rawlsian notions of ‘strict compliance’ and ‘favourable conditions’ with ‘feasible compliance’ and ‘feasible conditions’ respectively.

I also looked to defend the idealisation method from two further criticisms. First I have shown that idealisation is not inherently ‘ideological’, that is it does not necessarily distort our understanding of real world, nonideal, injustices. While idealisations *can* do this, this is not due to the essential character of idealisations but rather due to other theoretical inputs being unsatisfactory. Second, I considered the challenge that we should replace idealisation-based approaches with more intuitive approaches to ethics. In response to this I have drawn on a number of arguments about the importance of expertise in making progress within different specialisms.

In defending idealisation and showing its synergy with feasibility I have met the fourth Key Objective of the thesis. Thus I have shown that one can arrive at feasible ideals while employing idealisations and that just choice informing ideals do not rely on contradictory methods. In doing this I have also indirectly given further support to the third Key Objective, by demonstrating the viability of long-term approaches to just choice.

6. Ideal Theory and Just Choice

This thesis began by stating the importance of just choice for political theory. However it also noted disagreement about political theory's role in such choices. On one hand there are those who believe just choices are best supported by concrete and fact-sensitive theorising, while on the other there are those who argue that these choices require the input of more abstract ideals of justice. In the preceding chapters I have looked to defend the latter ideal-based approach to just choice. However I have done this while stressing the caveat that such theorising must often be sensitive to a range of nonideal considerations. A balanced approach to ideal theory is necessary if we wish to arrive at ideals that can inform the long-term choices that are demanded by political circumstances.

This balanced approach to ideal theory indicates that conventional understandings of the relationship between ideal theory and just choice, and by extension nonideal theory as a whole, ought to be reassessed. Conceptualisations of the relationship between these constituent parts of theories of justice that see a unidirectional process of ideal theory informing nonideal theory, fail to capture the complexities of this process. Instead this thesis has suggested that ideal theory has to be informed by a range of nonideal inputs. In this chapter I would like to discuss this more bidirectional and reciprocal conceptualisation of the ideal theory and nonideal theory relationship while also bringing together the significant claims made in each chapter to consider what they mean collectively for ideal theory and just choice.

The following section will thus begin with an overview of the main claims made in this thesis. I want to show how the four Key Objectives stated in the introduction have been met and what this entails for how we think about ideals and just choice (§ I). After this I will turn to the broader question of the relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory, contrasting the standard, unidirectional modelling of this with the more complicated bidirectional account that emerges from this discussion (§ II).

I. Ideals, Ideal Theory, and Just Choice

In Chapter 1 I outlined four Key Objectives that I intended to meet in this thesis:

1. Demonstrate that it is only when choice is informed by ideals that we are able to consistently make just choices.
2. Identify the conditions ideals have to satisfy in order to inform just choice.
3. Identify the conditions that have to hold in order for it to be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice.
4. Demonstrate that we can arrive at feasible ideals while employing idealisations.

Each objective served to establish either the necessity or viability of the ideal theory approach to just choice. In this section I would like to provide a summary of Chapters 2-5, stressing how the claims I made in these chapters allowed me to meet the Key Objectives themselves while also defending an ideal theory approach to just choice.

In *Chapter 2* I considered the ‘ideal claim’, which states that we require ideals in order to arrive at short-term and long-term choices. I sought to defend this position in the face of criticism from Amartya Sen who looks to present an ‘ideal free’ alternative to short-term choice whereby we can arrive at these judgements without recourse to any account of what full justice demands. For Sen, it is possible to say which of two or more nonideal options would be most just without referring to an ideal. Sen defends this claim in part through various analogies he makes between comparing the justness of nonideal options and comparing other things, such as the height of mountains.¹

In responding to Sen’s claims I discussed how the structure of comparative judgements differs depending on the categories of judgement that we are using, drawing a distinction between *internal* categories on the one hand and *external* categories on the other. When making comparisons using internal categories we need make no reference to additional instantiations of that category. For example, if we want to compare the height of two mountains it is not necessary to know the height of any other mountains. This is because the category ‘height’ is an inherent, objective property within the

¹ See Sen, pp. 214-238.

things being compared. We need not know anything about other instantiations of height, in mountains or otherwise, to be able to measure the height of a given thing. When making comparisons using external categories, however, we necessarily rely on external instantiations of the relevant category to inform us what standards of comparison to use. When comparing the relative justness of different nonideal options for instance, we need to refer to a further instantiation of justice that embodies certain principles that tell us what full justice demands. Without this external reference point, the different options will just be collections of facts stating allocations of rights or levels of equality that we might expect to result from each policy. Having an external instantiation of justice thus tells us whether these allocations and levels are just or not.

I also considered the further challenge that this external instantiation of justice need not be an ideal but may instead be the most just society that currently exists. I showed that sub-ideal instantiations are unable to inform just choice in this manner. Firstly we require ideals to inform us what justice is and thus to determine which of a given set of real world societies is most just. Even setting aside this point though, sub-ideal instantiations are still likely to be problematic. This is because a society that is the pinnacle of real world justice may, by certain standards, still be less just than other real world societies. For example, a society that is deemed the most just in the world on account of its civil liberties may have less admirable laws on material equality. As such we could not look to this society to provide us with standards of comparison for assessing the material equality of other nonideal social forms.

Having shown that ideals are necessary to make short-term just choices I then looked to show that they are also not overly demanding. Sen suggests that we should reject ideals of justice because they require us to painstakingly clarify the minutiae of governance in just societies before we can tackle the urgent real world injustices that motivate our political theorising.² However I showed that this was not the case and that ideals ought not, and generally are not, pitched at theoretically disabling levels of specificity. This is not only necessary in order to proceed to matters of nonideal theory without undue delay, but also because it ensures that ideals will not be invalidated due to minor differences between their prescriptions and real world conditions. Thus while

² Ibid., p. 223.

ideals ought not to be so broad as to be politically meaningless they do have to strive for at least a degree of compatibility with a range of social conditions. The ideal theory approach can thus be perfectly content to leave the clarifying of fine details that Sen speaks of to the real world practitioners who actually implement ideals.

By the same token I argued that Sen is wrong to assume that ruling out discussion of ideals would lead to far easier agreement on more immediate matters. Sen claims that disagreement on ideals can prevent theorists from realising the points where they do agree.³ Setting aside the fact that this assumption may be premised on a somewhat uncharitable depiction of political theorists as particularly stubborn individuals, I suggested that his point did not hold. I used the example of a socialist and a right-wing libertarian agreeing, despite their diametrically opposed ideals, that a capitalist society is more just than a slave society. However what this example and Sen's claim overlook are the range of disagreements that these two theorists may have at the nonideal level. Nonideal decision making is not only concerned with determining which option is most just but also which means ought to be used to arrive at it. Bracketing ideals does not automatically prevent such nonideal disagreements and indeed even those who share the exact same ideal may have profound and irreconcilable differences about which means are acceptable for achieving it.⁴

Having shown both that ideals are necessary for short-term choice and are not overly demanding, I proceeded to consider the far less philosophically contentious claim that ideals are necessary for long-term choice. As long-term choice requires a goal to work towards this is a much more intuitive claim. I did address some anticipated challenges to this version of the ideal claim, such as the suggestion that we may be able to use a series of nonideal goals to inform our long-term choice in place of a single ideal goal. In response I argued that doing this may lead to issues of path dependency whereby, in pursuing a nonideal goal, we may find that we are unable to achieve our ideal goal and that as such it is better to operate with one's primary end goal in clear sight.

³ Ibid., pp. 225-226.

⁴ The divisive and often vitriolic debates within Marxism between revolutionary socialists and social democrats about the most appropriate route to socialism provide a clear illustration of this second point. For a discussion of this debate and a defence of the former position see e.g. Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), pp. 45 and 60.

By defending both versions of the ideal claim i.e., the short term ideal claim and the long-term ideal claim, this chapter met the first Key Objective of this thesis, in showing why we can only consistently make just choices when our nonideal judgements are informed by ideals. Meeting this objective was a prerequisite for meeting the second, third, and fourth Key Objectives, as they are all premised on the assumption that ideals are necessary for just choice. More than this, it also allowed me to dismiss the particularly acute challenge posed by Sen. On the face of it, Sen's challenge to the ideal claim only threatens ideal approaches to short-term choice. However were it the case that Sen is correct then he would offer an immediate, ideal-free, and uncomplicated route to just choice that would not only replace ideal approaches to short-term choice but also offer an appealing alternative to the complexities of long-term choice.

Having shown that we require ideals if we are to arrive at just choices, *Chapter 3* was able to proceed to consider the conditions that ideals have to meet if they are to be able to perform this just choice informing role for either short-term or long-term choices. I began this discussion by making the fundamental claim that ideals that aim to inform long-term choice have to meet standards of feasibility, namely possibility, sufficient probability, and stability. The logic behind this is intuitive.

Firstly, long-term choices aim at the full realisation of a given ideal of justice, and thus any ideal that cannot possibly be realised is clearly unsuitable for this task. This means that ideals ought to, at a minimum, adhere to laws of nature and laws of formal logic.

Where possibility is concerned with whether or not something *can* happen, probability is concerned with whether or not something *will* happen. Standards of sufficient probability are thus necessary to ensure that ideals are not *merely* possible. There are innumerable ideals that, while possible, would be extremely hard to realise even with extensive investment of political resources. As long-term choice is a practical process aiming at the full realisation of ideals, we need to ensure that ideals represent sound investments in limited political resources. By saying that ideals need not just be possible but meet some established threshold of probability, we help lower the risk inherent in long-term choice.

Possibility and probability properly fall under the auspices of conventional understandings of ‘feasibility’, as they are concerned with whether or not ideals can and will occur in the future. The third condition, stability, relates to the different question of whether, once occurred, an ideal will be likely to be durable over time. For the sake of terminological simplicity, this conceptual difference was set to the side in order to include all three necessary conditions under the umbrella of ‘feasibility’.

An ideal is stable if a society whose laws adhere to it can return to an equilibrium point following any deviations from equilibrium that are brought on by tendencies within the ideal itself. Particularly important are those ideals that create and compound instability over time. We saw this in the example of the right-libertarian, Entitlement Ideal where it was suggested that continued application of this ideal would lead to worsening levels of inequality, which would weaken the economy, severely impair social mobility, and prevent significant numbers of people from having access to basic goods. In these conditions we imagined that people might look to replace this ideal with one that did not generate these problems.

Having clarified the conditions that ideals have to meet in order to inform long-term choice I set aside feasible ideal theory and turned to consider the alternative *infeasible* approach to ideal theory. While feasible ideal theory aims to provide normative guidance to inform practical decision making, infeasible ideal theory is primarily concerned with evaluative concepts that aim to improve our understanding of justice. I first looked to defend the validity of infeasible ideal theory in general. I sought to show that, contra critics such as Colin Farrelly,⁵ there is no conceptual inconsistency or logical fallacy inherent within theories of justice that do not aim to provide normative guidance.

I also anticipated the criticism that infeasible ideal theory risks devaluing the concept of justice. Underpinning this criticism was the fact that in order for a society to be just or unjust it has to fall within what Hume refers to as ‘the circumstances of justice’.⁶ This means that the society is one defined by ‘moderate scarcity’ and ‘limited

⁵ Farrelly, p. 845.

⁶ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Ch. 3, § 22.

altruism'.⁷ The problems that justice addresses are thus in a large part caused by the fact that the objective conditions in society prevent all from having what they wish without depriving others, and the subjective fact that there are limits on what human beings will generally be willing to do to help others. Justice is therefore by nature a *palliative* concept rather than a *curative* concept. Approaching a problem from the perspective of justice means accepting that one's solutions or conceptualisations may reduce the severity of a problem but will not fix the ultimate causes of it.

One thus might worry that an approach to justice that is not constrained by feasibility will push the boundaries of the concept to breaking point. However I showed that this need not be the case and that there can be many ideals that are both infeasible and within the circumstances of justice. Insensitivity to some facts need not entail insensitivity to all facts. By the same token it is at least possible that in the future there may be societies that are feasible but outside the circumstances of justice.

Having defended infeasible ideal theory I then looked to go further by showing that it is not only a conceptually coherent approach to theorising justice but that it may also have *practical* value. I illustrated the various ways that this could be the case by building on Zofia Stemplowska's comments on the practical value of infeasible communism.⁸ We can imagine that even if communism is infeasible it will still be able to inform our short-term choices about what to do to make contemporary capitalist societies more just. Knowing that alienation is an ethical issue in capitalist societies and knowing that communism looks to solve this through increases in work place democracy and common ownership can, in theory, help us make those short-term choices that will yield results that are most similar to communism. Even if it is the case that a communist society cannot be achieved this need not prevent the ideal of communism from having practical value in informing short-term choice.

Moreover I also suggested that the principle held even when conditions were so poor as to make any kind of *institutional* change impossible. In these circumstances communism might still tell us important things about capitalism's failings. Equipped with this information we could then change our behaviour accordingly, perhaps

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Stemplowska, 'What's Ideal about Ideal Theory?', p. 334.

altering the way we approach social interactions with others or seeking to make changes to other aspects of our lives in an attempt to counter some of the worst effects of institutionally irreducible alienation.

Overall this allowed me to make the central claim that in order for ideals to inform short-term choice they do not have to meet feasibility conditions. Instead, all that is required from ideals that are to inform short-term choice are standards of comparison.

Having defended the practical value of infeasible ideals to short-term choice I returned to long-term choice, considering the merits of the ‘uncertainty gambit’. This argument stresses how, in conditions of uncertainty about what is and is not feasible, it is better to use very relaxed standards of feasibility or simply none at all. Underpinning this challenge is the idea that we do not want to risk losing out on desirable ideals due to mistaken feasibility assessments made as a result of imperfect information. In considering the uncertainty gambit I was especially interested in how Marxist theory might be used to support it. Marxism employs various arguments pertaining to the concept of ‘denaturalisation’, that is, concepts that aim to show that seemingly fixed concepts are in fact historically specific and contingent. Thus I considered the claim that in conditions of uncertainty about the fixedness of human nature, the unpredictability of technological development, and uncertainty about which seemingly natural facts are indeed historically specific ideologies, it is better to theorise ideals unconstrained by our uncertain conceptions of feasibility.

I ultimately rejected all of these claims however. I first argued that even if we accept the historical character of human nature we can still refuse to employ it in ideal theory. This may be motivated by the concern that we might fail to properly predict developments in human nature and thus premise our ideal on what we later discover is an insufficiently probable conception of human nature. Alternatively we may worry that even if our conception of ideal human nature is correct, we will be unable to account for different historical instantiations of human nature *en route* to this and, as a result, be unable to plot a path between these different instantiations, thus rendering our ideal infeasible.

Much the same logic applied to the question of technological development. It is tempting to premise ideals on speculative technological changes, including those that would allow for material abundance and an escape from the circumstances of justice. However, once again, it is imprudent to base nonideal political action on achieving ideals that we cannot reasonably have significant confidence in. In both this case and in the case of human nature, the counter to the uncertainty gambit rests on wanting to avoid high risk investment of political resources. Even though the potential gains promised by these ideals may be significant, they are not sufficiently likely to warrant the risk involved. Moreover, an aspect of this risk is that we pursue such ideals at the cost of losing out on actually feasible ideals that we would have achieved had we been less ambitious.

In doing this then I defended the claim that long-term ideals ought to take feasibility conditions seriously. This, along with the reverse claim about short-term choice and the *absence* of feasibility conditions, allowed me to meet the second Key Objective by showing the conditions ideals have to meet in order to inform just choice. As well as establishing an important rule for future ideal theorising this also allowed me to proceed to consider the question of the further conditions that have to hold in order to reasonably favour long-term choice over short-term choice.

This question was taken up in *Chapter 4*. In looking to show that long-term choice can be defensible I began by discussing the intuitive assumption that long-term choice is, all other things being equal, more desirable than short-term choice. It promises significant gains, with the full realisation of an ideal of justice being the foremost one. However at the same time long-term choice is also problematic. It requires significant investment of political resources and while returns on these investments are high they are also, again all other things being equal, higher *risk* than investments in short-term choice are. For this reason one may assume that we ought to start from a default assumption that it is best to favour low-return and low-risk short-term choice over high-return and high-risk long-term choice.

However this default position, while reasonable, is at odds with contemporary political circumstances that require radical change. As such this chapter looked to establish whether there is a workable conception of feasibility that would manage to lower the

risks associated with long-term choice to a level where it would be defensible to favour this approach over short-term choice.

In pursuit of this I began Chapter 4 by further developing the general approach to feasible ideal theorising that was articulated in Chapter 3. I introduced the concept of ‘obstacles’ to understand those standards that ideals have to meet in order to satisfy feasibility conditions. Obstacles can be either *fixed*, permanent features of society, or *contingent*, potentially removable features of society. While many obstacles in the former category are reasonably intuitive, those in the latter category are often complex. If it is sufficiently likely that a contingent obstacle can be overcome then its presence is not enough to render an ideal infeasible. In sum then, in order for an ideal to meet feasibility conditions it has to show that it can either avoid or remove the various feasibility obstacles that confront it.

Having discussed the idea of obstacles, I turned to consider the question of how feasibility assessments are made in each feasibility category. I noted that being concerned with questions of logic and the laws of nature, possibility assessments are, at least in present circumstances, largely made through philosophical analysis and intuitive, common sense application of scientific laws. Probability and stability assessments on the other hand are more complex, requiring reference to social scientific and historical explanatory models. This is because the latter categories require conceptions of factors such as people’s tolerance of the costs associated with different ideals, and as such are, in essence, more multi-disciplinary and empirical.

Following my discussion of feasibility assessments in general, this chapter saw a departure from the tone of the thesis up to this point. Until this stage I had sought to take a formal approach to the discussion. In looking to underlabour for ideal theory I wanted to show why ideal theory *in general* was necessary in order to arrive at just choices. Similarly, the second Key Objective looked to identify the conditions that ideals as a whole have to meet in order to inform each type of just choice. However in order to provide a defensible approach to long-term choice it was necessary to make specific claims about particular approaches to feasibility.

With this in mind I returned to Marxist theory. I wanted to show that Marxism provides the means to sufficiently lower the risks associated with long-term choice so as to make it defensible. The Marxist approach rests on claims about the inherent logic of capitalism, which suggest that the competitive, profit-motive inherent to its social relations make capitalist societies tend towards material inequalities and economic instability. I suggested that these amount to provisional obstacles confronting liberal ideals in general and liberal egalitarian ideals in particular. In the case of the former, the inherent economic instability and periodic crises that are produced by this economic system suggest that capitalist societies may be susceptible to compliance issues as people become dissatisfied with decreases in living standards and rising unemployment. In the case of the latter, capitalism's tendency towards inequalitarian distributions of wealth suggests that attempts to make society more materially equal will have to work against the natural tendencies of the system.

Next I considered the counter-argument that these tendencies can be corrected by ideal informed state intervention to stabilise markets and impose certain patterns of wealth distribution. My response to this claim, derived from Karl Marx's metaphor of base and superstructure, suggested that dominant economic interests and processes shape the form that the rest of society's levels take.⁹ As such, we can expect a society's political and legal system to operate in favour of those who hold the most economic power and who, in material terms, have the most to lose from any attempts to intervene in the functioning of the economy. For this reason, attempts to use political solutions to fix economic problems may often meet significant resistance.

I then considered two serious challenges to the Marxist position. First I addressed the claim that the Marxist conception of feasibility was so stringent as to exclude *all* ideals. In response I showed that socialism is able to meet Marxist feasibility conditions in various ways. Crucially it is premised on a non-competitive economic system where production is organised democratically rather than according to market processes. As such there is no necessary structural logic that tends towards inequality or instability. Moreover, socialism has excellent, responsive, synergy with capitalism as it responds

⁹ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'Preface'.

to problems that are produced by capitalism's inherent logic, by seeking to replace this with a fairer, more rational system of production.

The second challenge I considered was the claim that the Marxist conception of feasibility might place such a strong emphasis on economic processes that it renders ideal theory and just choice redundant. I argued that this only held for the abstract theoretical models used by Marxism. When applied to reality the laws postulated by these models can only be seen as tendencies that have to be considered alongside numerous other processes. Key among these processes are the conscious decisions of individuals, often based on the moral reasoning that underpins ideal theory and just choice.

While I did not argue that the Marxist conception of feasibility could possibly provide absolute refutations of the feasibility of liberal ideals I do believe that it gives us compelling reasons to doubt the suitability of these ideals for informing long-term choice. Moreover Marxism suggests a model for understanding ideals and long-term choice within a particular social structure; something that is well captured by Marx's comments that '[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already'.¹⁰

In providing this stringent and exclusive approach, we are able to find in Marxism a sufficiently low-risk conception of feasibility as to make a strong case for favouring long-term choice over short-term choice. This case is further strengthened by the fact that Marxism casts doubt on the practical value of short-term choice in capitalist society. Given the incorrigibility of capitalism, attempts to reform it in order to increase the immediate justness of capitalist societies may be prone to fail and thus constitute unduly high-risk options. In demonstrating this I was collectively able to meet the third Key Objective in showing conditions in which it can be defensible to favour long-term choice over short-term choice.

Chapter 5 marked a return to the more general level of discussion that defined most of the previous three chapters, considering once again formal questions about ideal theory

¹⁰ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 5.

and just choice. However this chapter did mark a further change from earlier discussions in moving from questions about the conditions that ideals have to meet in order to inform just choice to questions concerning the methods that have to be used to arrive at these ideals. In this sense this chapter shifted from discussion predominantly surrounding the *product* of ideal theory and its relation to just choice, to the *process* of ideal theory and its relation to just choice.

The key method in ideal theory is *idealisation*. Idealisations are conceptualisations of real world phenomena that do not accurately represent how those phenomena function in contemporary reality. Idealisations are beneficial as they create the theoretical space where we can pursue inquiries we otherwise would not logically be able to.

I began this chapter by outlining three key functions that idealisations perform. I considered the abstracting function, whereby one brackets certain variables in order to assess a concept according to other variables. For example, we might assume that laws that adhere to an ideal would not face any compliance obstacles in order to allow us to assess that ideal's stability or desirability instead, independently of any concerns about levels of support for it. I also considered the simplifying function that plays a facilitating role in theorising by allowing one to engage with simplified conceptualisations of phenomena. Without simplifications we would spend a virtually infinite amount of time trying to conceptualise phenomena in their full, real world complexities. In discussing these points I wanted to show that idealisations are a fundamental part of most forms of reasoning and are intrinsic to many forms of philosophical argument. In doing this I hoped to demonstrate that it was very difficult for any critic of idealisation to reject the method wholesale.

I also considered the normative function of idealisations, which is a prerequisite for normatively accurate conceptions of justice. Normative idealisations provide theories with non-representative conceptions of phenomena such as compliance and objective social conditions from which to derive ideals. I illustrated this function with reference to an egalitarian philosopher looking to arrive at an ideal of justice. If she was to derive her ideals from contemporary standards of compliance then she would be unlikely to arrive at an egalitarian ideal as she would likely realise that such an ideal would be unpopular at present given current attitudes to taxation and wealth redistribution,

especially among the wealthy and powerful. However we may see this result as counter intuitive, feeling that obstacles such as these can be overcome, and that, more generally, our ideals should specify standards that people *ought* to adhere to, not just standards that they will adhere to anyway. Normative idealisations thus employ non-representative models in order to allow us to arrive at ideals not constrained by current nonideal limitations.

However the necessity of normative idealisations raises a possible contradiction at the heart of feasible ideal theory. Chapters 3 and 4 focused on the need for the ideals that inform long-term choice to meet feasibility conditions, while Chapter 5 stressed that ideals ought to be theorised with idealisations. It thus appeared that ideal theory had to be both fact-sensitive and fact-insensitive and thus that the two main aspects of the ideal theory process were pulling ideals in opposite directions. A further criticism was also raised, namely that the idealisations that are required if we are to arrive at normatively accurate ideals may result in ideals that are too distant from reality to ever be achieved, and thus unable to inform long-term choice. This is what Laura Valentini refers to as ‘the paradox of ideal theory’.¹¹

The sharpest version of the informing critique that motivates the paradox of ideal theory suggests that for an idealisation to be ‘good’ it cannot describe an infeasible state of affairs that has to be realised in order for the ideal derived from it to be feasible. As normative idealisations use idealised conditions to generate ideals, it follows that the ideals will only hold where these conditions also hold. The solution to this is to reconfigure normative idealisations in light of this criticism.

I thus argued that it was necessary, when making idealised assumptions, to replace ‘strict compliance’ with ‘feasible compliance’. This latter category does not assume the impossible condition that *all* people fully adhere to laws. Rather it is a projection of the optimal, feasible, form of compliance that can be expected. I argued that the same rationale should be applied to how we conceptualise objective conditions, to ensure that this too does not exceed standards of feasibility and thus lead to ideals that are in turn infeasible.

¹¹ Valentini, ‘On the Apparent Paradox’, p. 333.

Following this point I considered Charles W. Mills's claim that idealisations are necessarily 'ideological'.¹² Mills argues that idealisations actively distort our understanding of real world injustices and marginalise the plight of oppressed groups. Mills attributes the popularity of idealisation to the overrepresentation of middleclass, white men in academic philosophy departments who have little experience of the phenomena that idealisation distorts. In response to this I repeated the claim that ideals, and by extension idealisations, are necessary for us to engage critically with real world injustices. Idealisations do not ignore or overlook injustices but rather consciously bracket them. Making idealisations thus allows us to generate ideals that inform just choices that overcome these injustices.

In responding to these criticisms and defending a revised approach to idealisation I sought to meet the fourth Key Objective of this thesis by demonstrating that the apparent contradiction between feasibility's fact-sensitivity and idealisation's fact-insensitivity could in fact be reconciled. Showing this also allowed me to make the further claim in support of long-term theorising that as well as being a politically urgent and broadly defensible approach to ideal theory, it is also a methodologically coherent one.

By meeting these four objectives I have looked to defend an ideal theory approach to just choice. I have shown that ideals and thus ideal theory are necessary should we want to make consistently just choices, both short-term and long-term. I have also sought to show the role that both infeasible and feasible ideal theory can respectively play in informing these choices. In particular I have looked to defend the viability and importance of feasible ideal theory and long-term choices.

II. Ideal Theory and Nonideal Theory (2)

One of the broader implications of this thesis is that it challenges conventional conceptualisations of the relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory. In this section I will outline a reconstruction of this relationship in light of the different claims

¹² Mills, pp. 171-172.

made throughout the previous four chapters. I will begin by restating the conventional unidirectional approach outlined in Chapter 1, before discussing the necessity of a new, bidirectional approach that emphasises the necessity of extensive dialogue between the two enterprises.

We saw earlier that, for Rawls, ideal theory is responsible for generating ideals of justice, while nonideal theory is responsible for using these ideals to inform just choice in nonideal conditions. Recall that we also saw that this approach was in clear opposition to those, such as Charles W. Mills and Shane J. Ralston,¹³ for whom ideal theory and nonideal theory are opposing enterprises each offering different ways of theorising justice. For Rawls then, ideal theory provides the requisite philosophical support to allow us to engage with the ‘urgent’ questions of nonideal theory.¹⁴

I do not believe that we ought to question this fundamental premise of the ideal theory and nonideal theory relationship; indeed Chapter 2 focused on defending this claim in the face of Sen’s criticisms. Nothing that I have claimed disputes the fact that we are unable to arrive at just choices at the level of nonideal theory unless this process is informed by ideals formulated by ideal theory. Moreover, I accept that this model holds unproblematically for the ideals that are to inform short-term choice.

However this thesis does suggest that should we wish to theorise ideals that are to inform long-term choice it is necessary to admit significant input from nonideal perspectives. This is a challenge to the assumption that the proper relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory is a *unidirectional* one where ideal theory imparts information to nonideal theory with little to no input moving in the other direction.

Indeed, what is clear from this research is that if we wish to theorise feasible ideals then we have to commence ideal theorising with an existing sense of the feasibility conditions that we want our ideal to meet. This means that the conventional approach to the ideal theory and nonideal theory relationship has to be challenged. It is not sufficient to ideal theorise and then apply the product of this to nonideal theory, rather it is the latter enterprise that ought to have ‘temporal priority’ in theories of justice,

¹³ See Mills, p. 182 and Ralston, p. 78.

¹⁴ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 8.

with conceptions about what is and is not feasible informing the basic assumptions of ideal theory.

Accepting this does not mean we have to accept the claim that ideal theory loses its ‘logical priority’.¹⁵ As stressed above, unless we have ideals to inform nonideal choices we will not be able to arrive at just choices. However, we can accept this while also accepting that unless we have a sense of feasibility we will be unable to arrive at these ideals in the first place. If we do not do this then we will risk informing long-term choice with infeasible ideals and wasting political resources that would be better invested elsewhere.

We saw in the previous section that one of the ways we can ensure that ideal theory is feasible is by rethinking the normative idealisations used in theories of justice. Where we want to arrive at ideals for informing long-term choice it is necessary that the idealisations that these ideals are derived from are feasible themselves. Providing that the idealisations in question capture the optimal level of compliance or objective conditions that we can expect then these assumptions will yield ideals that will be both normatively accurate and achievable.

Conventional characterisations of ideal theory and nonideal theory thus risk overlooking the extent to which ideal theory is reliant on input from nonideal theory. This is due to the fact that ideal theory relies on methodological insights from nonideal theory. However it is also the case that the reverse holds as well and that nonideal theory may rely on insight from methods traditionally defined as being part of ideal theory’s domain.

While it may be intuitive to assume that ideal theory uses idealisation while nonideal theory does not, this is unlikely to be the case. Indeed nonideal theory will almost certainly require the use of all three of the functions of idealisation. First, as we saw earlier it is likely the case that virtually *all* forms of reasoning rely on simplifying idealisations. Attempts to engage with any social process in its full complexity may

¹⁵ See Simmons, p.36 and Hendrix, p. 133.

even be necessarily impossible, but even if they are not, the time it would take to arrive at a full theory of any process would be theoretically debilitating in its duration.

Similarly, like ideal theory, nonideal theorists will also need to use abstracting idealisations in order to understand the world around them. We can think of two uses that this function may be put to. First, it can be used to create explanatory models such as Marx's theory of the logic of capitalism. Clearly, understanding real world social processes is a vital component of any attempt to plot a course from nonideal conditions to ideal conditions. Without such an understanding we would be unable to anticipate possible obstacles to realising an ideal. Second, like ideal theorists, nonideal theorists will also have to bracket certain concepts for normative purposes as well. We saw in Chapter 5 that somebody theorising the Entitlement Ideal might want to bracket questions of compliance in order to assess that ideal's stability or desirability. Nonideal theorists may also have to do exactly this. We can imagine that a nonideal theorist will want to assess whether or not a given stage that lies between current conditions and ideal conditions is worth trying to reach. It might be expected that if society can be brought to this point then it will make the final push to realise the ideal significantly easier. However it may also be that this middle-stage is considered improbable. In these circumstances it would be prudent to assess the stability of this stage anyway, in case earlier predictions about its probability prove incorrect.

Finally, nonideal theory will also have to employ normative idealisations. In order to plot a course through these various stages between contemporary society and ideal society, nonideal theorists will have to determine which conceptions of nonideal justice will be compatible with the different levels of compliance or the different levels of objective conditions found in each stage. Knowing the conceptions of justice that may be able to be implemented in different conditions will allow nonideal theorists to try to tie together these different stages in order to realise the ideal in full.

For these reasons, any attempt to distinguish between ideal theory and nonideal theory in terms of inherent differences in the methods they use will likely be unhelpful. As such, Luca Jacopo Uberti's claim that ideal theory is 'formed under idealised or simplified assumptions' while nonideal theory 'represents social reality in its full

complexity' is only partially correct.¹⁶ Nonideal theory will also always be formed under idealised assumptions, and many of ideal theory's idealised assumptions will be tempered by feasibility.

This more nuanced conceptualisation of ideal theory and nonideal theory is well illustrated by the spectrum based approach discussed in the previous chapter. This approach can be illustrated with the concept of compliance. Imagine a spectrum running from full non-compliance on one hand to strict-compliance on the other. We require nonideal theory to determine what the level of compliance is at present, relying perhaps on a combination of social scientific theories and concrete data. Ideal theory on the other hand has to determine, with nonideal input, what the optimal level of feasible compliance is. Here it will probably make more use of predictive models, social theories, and philosophical reasoning to attempt to conceptualise what optimal feasible compliance is.

The next step then is for nonideal theory to work towards shifting contemporary compliance so it is in line with optimal feasible compliance, in order that the ideal in question can be realised. This is the process of predicting different nonideal stages *en route* to an ideal and trying to plot courses between them. In doing this it will employ a range of idealised models in order to predict future, suboptimal stages of feasible compliance. What is implied by this then is a dynamic process of moving back and forth between ideal theory and nonideal theory with each enterprise using inputs from the other.

Despite the bidirectional nature of the relationship between ideal theory and nonideal theory and the concomitant blurring of methodological boundaries, the two disciplines remain categorically distinct. For one, as I stressed at the outset, it remains the case that nonideal theory requires ideal theory to present it with a target to work towards. Indeed nonideal theory cannot begin to accurately theorise compliance until it has a sense of the ideal that is to be realised as different ideals will have different compliance issues. Also, while being informed by nonideal inputs, ideal theory still establishes a standard of optimal feasible compliance (or whatever other category is being

¹⁶ Uberti, p. 206.

theorised) and nonideal theory works to decrease the distance between contemporary compliance and optimal feasible compliance, by attempting to make choices that will shift the former closer to the latter.

III. Conclusion

As I noted in Chapter 1, most of the normative statements presented in this thesis are *methodologically*, rather than morally, prescriptive. This thesis has not aimed to provide an ideal theory of justice but rather to underlabour for such theories. In meeting the objectives discussed in Section II and conceptualising the ideal theory and nonideal theory relationship discussed in Section III I hope to have contributed towards this. I have sought to provide a framework for future ideal theorising, especially feasible ideal theorising, and the discussions of feasibility conditions in Chapters 3 and 4, as well as the discussion about idealisation in Chapter 5, have looked to provide theoretical support for this approach. An outcome of my research, particularly in looking to outline a defensible approach to long-term choice, has been to emphasise the contribution that Marxism can make to feasible ideal theory, and further work in this area may be particularly profitable.

Whichever normative approach is employed though, it ought to be one that aims to inform *long-term choice*. This thesis has cast doubt on the practical efficacy of short-term choice, while stressing the urgent need for more radical, long-term approaches to theorising justice. In demonstrating how the risks associated with the latter can be reduced I intend to have shown that long-term choice can be a viable and defensible approach to making societies more just.

Glossary

Distance: The difference, which just choice aims to decrease, between a given nonideal state of affairs and an ideal. Distance can be measured either in terms of *similarity* or *closeness*. Similarity is the standard generally relevant to short-term choice and is concerned with the extent to which a given nonideal state of affairs directly resembles the ideal; for example, a society would become more similar to a strict-egalitarian ideal if that society's Gini coefficient fell. Closeness is the standard generally relevant to long-term choice and is concerned with how much nonideal 'space' exists between a given nonideal state of affairs and an ideal; for example, a society would become closer to an ideal if the time or political resources required to fully realise the ideal decreased. Some actions may lead to a decrease in distance as closeness while leading to an increase in distance as similarity, for example, 'one-step forward and two-steps back choices'.

External and Internal Categories: The terminology employed to refer to the categories used for comparative judgements. *External categories* are those categories where standards of comparison have to be derived from other instantiations of the category, for example in order to say which of two alternative states of affairs would be more just we have to consult an ideal of justice, in order to know what justice demands. *Internal categories* are those categories where standards of comparison are inherent within the things being compared, for example if we are comparing the height of two mountains we do not need to refer to any external instantiation of height.

Feasibility Conditions: The conditions ideals have to meet in order to be feasible and thus able to inform long-term choice. Requires satisfying given standards of possibility, sufficient probability, and stability. What this entails is dependent on how particular approaches conceptualise feasibility conditions. *See also*, '*possibility*', '*sufficient probability*', and '*stability*'.

Ideal, also, ideal of justice; ideal conception of justice: A conceptualisation of the rules that would govern political decision-making in a just society. Used to inform just choice, ideals may be *feasible* or *infeasible*. Feasible ideals are those that satisfy feasibility conditions and may be used to inform both long-term choice and short-term choice. Generally infeasible ideals may only be used to inform short-term choice.

Ideal Claim: The claim that in order to generally make just choices it is necessary that those choices be informed by an ideal of justice. Takes the form of the *long-term ideal claim* (LIC), which states that ideals are generally necessary to make long-term choices, and the *short-term ideal claim* (SIC), which states that ideals are generally necessary to make short-term choices.

Idealisation: The intentional use of conceptualisations of real world phenomena that do not accurately represent those phenomena. Uses three functions to create the theoretical space necessary to pursue inquiries that would otherwise be logically unsound. The simplifying function simplifies phenomena in order to avoid the necessity of conceptualising them in their full, impractical, complexity. The abstracting function brackets categories that may otherwise prevent ideals from being assessed by another category. For the normative function of idealisation, see, '*normative idealisation*'.

Ideal Theory: One of two constituent branches of theories of justice. Defined by the product of its theorising, i.e. ideals, and by the process of its theorising, i.e. idealisation. Ideal theory can be divided into *feasible ideal theory* and *infeasible ideal theory* with the former producing feasible ideals and the latter producing infeasible ideals. See also, '*nonideal theory*'.

Just Choice: The choices made by nonideal theory that aim to increase the justness of society. Can be separated into *short-term choice* and *long-term choice*. Short-term choice aims to make society immediately more just, while long-term choice aims to achieve full justice over time.

Normative Idealisation: The type of *idealisation* that is the distinctive and central method of ideal theory. Uses non-representative conceptualisations of real world phenomena in order to arrive at normatively accurate ideals. For example, assuming strict compliance to prevent ideals being derived from current levels of compliance. See also, '*idealisation*'.

Nonideal Theory: One of two constituent branches of theories of justice. Uses various explanatory and ethical theories to implement ideals of justice in order to make just choices. See also, '*ideal theory*'.

Obstacles: The impediments that prospective ideals have to either avoid or remove in order to satisfy each of the three feasibility conditions. For example, an ideal that required humans to live without sustenance would be confronted by the possibility obstacle that human beings require sustenance to live. Obstacles can be further divided into *fixed* and *contingent* types. Fixed obstacles are those that cannot be removed, and thus ideals must avoid them in order to ensure feasibility. Contingent obstacles can be removed, though the likelihood of being able to do so will differ according to the specifics of the obstacle and ideal involved.

Political Resources: The 'currency' of nonideal theory. May include a range of goods that are invested in just choices including time, money, labour, opportunities, and 'political energy'. All other things being equal long-term choice requires a greater investment of political resources than short-term choice does. By extension, long-term

choice is therefore, all other things being equal, a higher-risk investment than short-term choice.

Possibility: The most fundamental feasibility condition, which assesses whether ideals *can* be achieved. Can be divided into *logical possibility* and *natural possibility*, the former ensuring ideals do not violate laws of logic and the latter ensuring ideals do not violate laws of nature. Assessments are generally made using philosophical analysis and, largely common sense, natural scientific knowledge.

Stability: The feasibility condition that assesses whether ideals, if realised, will be durable over time. Durability entails that a society that adheres to an ideal is able, without external assistance, to return to an equilibrium point following any deviations from equilibrium caused by mechanisms internal to the ideal itself. Stability is conceptualised and assessed by using social science, social theory, and historical theory.

Sufficient probability: The feasibility condition that assesses whether ideals *will* be achieved. *Sufficient* probability implies that ideals have to meet a given standard of probability, in order to lower the likelihood of long-term choice being informed by improbable ideals. Sufficient probability is conceptualised and assessed by using social science, social theory, and historical theory.

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¹ Where bibliographical dates are followed by an asterisk ('*') this indicates that the date refers not to the text's original year of publication but rather to the approximate year it was written. As some of Marx's texts were only published close to a century after he wrote them I have provided the dates these were written in order to give a better sense of the chronology of his work.

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² VTsIOM is the acronym for ‘Vsyerossiiskii tsentr izučeniia obščestvennogo mnenija’, that translates as ‘The Russian Public Opinion Research Centre’.

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